K.M. SHEA

Rumpelstiltskin

Rumpelstiltskin
A Timeless Fairy Tale
By: K. M. Shea

a Take Out The Trash! Publication
Copyright © K.M. Shea 2013

All Rights Reserved.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any number whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of quotations embodied in articles and reviews.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Epilogue
Other Books by K. M. Shea
Coming Soon
About the Author

Chapter 1

When the hellhound howled, Stil climbed a tree. Branches scratched at his face, and the cold wind further chilled his wet clothes. He positioned himself on a branch, held his breath and clung to the tree trunk. The dull thud of horse hooves pounded in the forest like a war drum. When the animal snorted, its nostrils flared like an ember, placing the beast and its rider three trees over.

Stil's lungs ached as he watched the horse paw at the ground. He was almost to the border. He couldn't be caught now!

The hound howled again, the noise traveling away from Stil. The mount and rider retreated, cantering after the hound in the darkness of night.

When Stil could no longer hear the horse, he gasped for air. His chest heaved as he climbed down. He wanted to sit and rest, but he couldn't take the chance. The rider would be back. Stil needed to get across the border and into Verglas before then.

Leaves crunched under Stil's feet as he blindly made his way through the forest, his soaked cloak sticking to him like slug slime.

As Stil slunk along, he snatched up a leaf and rubbed it between his hands. It turned into the finest silver before cracking and twisting, shaping into an intricate snowflake the size of Stil's thumbnail.

"Home," he whispered before blowing on the magic-made snowflake. It glowed and lifted out of Stil's hand, twirling and gliding through the air like real snow.

Stil almost lost sight of it several times. The snowflake was tossed through the dark forest by the rough wind and torrential rains like a toy boat bobbing on an angry ocean, but the tiny beacon of light led Stil closer to Verglas—closer to safety.

The snowflake bobbed ahead, and Stil smiled when he saw the silvery blue light of the Verglas border, glowing in response to his magic.

A short distance behind him the hound howled.

Stil gave up all pretenses of stealth and ran, the heavy pants of the hound snapping at his heels. Lightning illuminated the forest, and Stil barely avoided a fallen tree.

The border was within reach when the hound caught up. It snapped down on Still's arm, yanking the mage off his feet.

The dog wasn't a normal hunting animal. It was a hellhound—huge, dangerous, and deadly. Red foam dripped from its mouth as it clenched Stil's arm, breaking his skin and drawing blood. The hound snarled. Its eyes glowed red in the darkness, and deeper in the forest the horse screamed an answer.

Stil kicked at the canine's chest and grabbed a handful of mud. "Be rock," he said between clenched teeth as the pounding of horse hooves drew closer. The mud hardened into rock, and Stil bashed it against the hellhound's skull. The hound staggered, but it bit down harder on Stil's arm. Stil held in a shout and hammered on the animal's skull, using the rock like a mallet.

The hound let go, snarling and shaking its head. Stil stumbled backwards over a stump, which sent him crashing head over heels to the muddy forest floor.

Lightning flashed again, illuminating the nightmare when it arrived, carrying its rider. The nightmare was a horse—if it could be called that—which fed on nightmares and craved absolute darkness. It was skeletal, but its nostrils glowed, and its eyes were the same white as spoiled milk. It screamed (a sound more similar to glass breaking than the neigh of a horse) and gnashed its abnormally sharp teeth before its rider pulled it back.

"*Craftmage*," the rider hissed.

Stil reached into his soaked clothes and slapped a red feather on the soaked stump. "Ignite!" he shouted before rolling away.

Even though it was old and saturated, the stump exploded into a roaring fire.

The horse spooked and shied away from the dazzling flames, shrieking in pain as the light burned its eyes.

Stil leapt out of his roll and ran forward, his eyes hooked on the glimmering Verglas border. Behind him the rider growled, kicking the nightmare forward. After a moment's hesitation, the mount edged around the stump and chased after Stil, closing in for the kill. When Stil could almost feel the nightmare's sulfur-scented breath on the back of his neck, he threw himself forward, diving across the Verglas border as the nightmare lunged for him. Stil hit the ground just as ice crunched, and

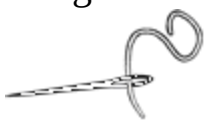
giant stalagmites popped out of the ground—almost impaling the nightmare with sword-sharp tips and edges.

The rider reined in the nightmare as the ice wall formed, popping and cracking as more ice and snow gathered to create an impenetrable barrier that glowed unnaturally. The rider could travel up and down the Verglas border until his mount dropped with exhaustion, but he would never get inside. The Snow Queen's magic wouldn't let him set foot inside the country.

The nightmare screamed in rage on the other side of the ice wall. He turned his mount around and galloped back into Loire.

Stil chuckled between gulps of air. He forced himself to sit upright. He was soaked, and his arm was injured. The rain spattered his face as he dug through his cloak. When he found what he was looking for—a ruby cut in the shape of a flame—he breathed on it, sighing in relief when the charm activated and heat seeped into his body.

Stil stumbled to his feet and started in the direction of his temporary home. "I don't understand," Stil said, pushing his sopping hair out of his face. "What merit is there in hunting *me*?"



Gemma ran her hand over fabrics and cloth. Her fingers lingered on the bolts of violet-colored velvet and blush-red silk brocade. Her forehead furrowed she internally paged through patterns and dress styles like a child flipping through a picture book.

Lady Linnea would look fetching in the violet velvet, which would offset her blonde hair. However, red brocade was the rage in Loire thanks to Princess Elle, who wore many gowns made of rose-red material.

Gemma's mind raced with the various styles she could design using the fabrics, but her mind was made up when she caught sight of the length of snow-white fur.

"I'll take the fur, all of the violet velvet, and some more white linen," Gemma told the merchant as she tugged on the desired materials.

"This is to go on the Lovland's account?" the merchant asked.

"Yes," Gemma said. She nodded in acknowledgment to the villager that entered the store—she knew him well. As a child, she had played often with his flat-nosed daughter who had a penchant for pinching. "I might be back for the silk brocade, too."

The merchant recorded Gemma's purchase. "It's a good cloth. You're sure you don't want the grey silk?"

Gemma glanced at the described material. The silk was well made, and the color was a subdued dove gray, but that shade would make Lady Linnea resemble a pale ghost. "It's not the right cloth for Lady Linnea."

"Perhaps, but it would look stunning with your eyes," the merchant said with a winning smile.

Caught off guard, Gemma blinked twice. "Perhaps, but I don't need a dress made of silk. It wouldn't survive my week. This is all I want for now," she said, resting her hand on the new material before wrapping her purchases with worn linen.

"Of course, of course. You be careful walking home, Miss Kielland. Mind the weather, you hear?"

"Yes. Until next time," Gemma said before she left the tiny store, hauling her fabrics on her back.

"Morning, Gemma,"

"Good morning, Mrs. Hagen," Gemma said to the older woman as they scurried through the village square.

"Making *another* dress for Lady Linnea, are you?" the older woman asked, her plump lips set in disapproval.

"That is what she employs me for," Gemma said as they hurried past an empty fountain.

"Frivolous, I say," Mrs. Hagen grunted. "It's a shame you took up clothes making. Your mother used to make the most beautiful quilts. Everyone needs quilts in this frigid place."

"I should think everyone needs clothes, too, Mrs. Hagen," Gemma said, "or the city would be a blinding and chilly place to live."

"It would WHAT?" Mrs. Hagen exclaimed. "Child, you sound just like Guri these days."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hagen," Gemma said.

"That wasn't a compliment. So, Miss Gemma, when will you pursue a real livelihood? You cannot live off Lady Linnea's charity forever. After all, who needs fashion and *dresses* in a country of snow and a mad—," Mrs. Hagen cut herself off and looked furtively in the direction of the Verglas palace.

No one called King Torgen mad, even though he clearly was, if they wanted to survive.

Gemma and Mrs. Hagen reached the perimeter of the village square. In summers, the square used to house outdoor markets. But that was years ago. Now it was used to publically execute whatever poor sop King Torgen decided to kill on a whim.

“I enjoy making dresses and clothes,” Gemma said.

“So, buy a doll,” Mrs. Hagen said, her moist eyes sourly directed to Gemma’s cloth purchases.

Gemma smiled insincerely. “Perhaps one day. But for now, I must bid you good day, Mrs. Hagen,” she said, bobbing a curtsey.

“Good day to you, Gemma,” Mrs. Hagen said before Gemma sped up her walking pace until she was all but trotting. It was a survival technique. Most of the Ostfold gossips did not have the lung capacity to speak and run at the same time.

Gemma hurried home, taking a twisting path to Lady Linnea’s house.

The grand manor was situated closer to the village square than it was to the palace. It was a short walk in the cool, fall air before Gemma arrived. Several flags flew from the flagpole, marking the three additional noble families staying with Lady Linnea’s parents instead of risking the palace.

Gemma slipped in through the back entrance, avoiding the chaotic mess of the kitchen. She climbed a servants’ staircase and slipped into her workroom—which was a sea of lavish cloth and held the great luxury of a fireplace.

Gemma rang the bell to summon a scullery maid before she unwrapped her materials and splayed them out over a workbench.

“Did you need something, Gemma?” a scullery maid asked, poking her head in the room.

“Sissel—perfect. I was hoping it would be you. Could you get a fire started, please?” Gemma said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sissel said, darting for the fireplace. In minutes she had the fireplace cleaned and lit, warming the room to a toasty temperature.

“Is that all?”

Gemma snapped a knotted rope. “No. Stand, please.”

Wide-eyed, Sissel stood, brushing off her ash-smeared smock.

Gemma walked around the scullery maid, brandishing her rope. She maneuvered Sissel’s arms, measuring them and her shoulder width.

“Thank you, Sissel,” Gemma said after making a complete circuit around her.

“Sissel? *Sissel!*”

“Excuse me, Gemma,” Sissel said, bolting for the door.

“There you are,” Malfrid, the head maid, said. “Cook needs you in the kitchen. Get a move on!” the red-faced woman said, folding her formidable arms across her chest. In this pose, she resembled a cream puff in her brown and white uniform.

“She was helping me, Malfrid,” Gemma said, but Sissel was already gone, pounding down the servants’ stairs.

“Hmph, no wonder,” Malfrid said, strolling into Gemma’s workroom. “Must be nice to be paid to sit around a room and do little.”

“Is it? I wouldn’t know,” Gemma said, writing Sissel’s measurements on a small slate.

“At least I’m hired because I’m good at what I do—not because I’m a personal friend of Lady Linnea,” Malfrid said.

“You needn’t worry about that ever happening to you—with Lady Linnea or anyone else,” Gemma said, snagging a pin cushion.

Malfrid went stiff as she tried to figure out if Gemma was insulting her or not. “Tale-teller,” she finally said.

“If I told tales, I wouldn’t put up with your presence,” Gemma said, picking up a scissors. “Now if you don’t mind, I have a dress to make,” she said, pointedly staring at the door.

“You might be proud of yourself, Gemma Kielland. But you’re nothing but a chicken borrowing turkey feathers,” Malfrid said before storming out of the room.

“Peacock feathers. You mean I’m borrowing peacock feathers,” Gemma called after the stocky maid, although her attention was focused on the fabrics spread across her workbench.

Most dressmakers would draw out a dress before they started making it. At the very least, they would measure out the material. Not Gemma. She could tell where to cut and exactly how to stitch fabrics together.

Gemma worked in silence, her eyes—an unnerving mash of gray and blue so pale, they looked like river ice—narrowed in concentration. Her tea-brown hair spilled around her head in wavy, messy, shoulder-length ringlets—the ends twisted up in curls that no amount of brushing could undo. Her heart-shaped face was highlighted by the blue hair-band

peppered with snowflake embroidery that ran across her forehead and pushed her hair away from her face.

Gemma's button nose twitched as she cut the last piece of pricey fabric, and the door to her workroom opened.

"Gemma, I see you are hard at work," Lady Lovland, Lady Linnea's mother, said as she entered the room. Her daughter and a lady's maid trailed her like lap-dogs.

"Yes, My Lady," Gemma said, setting her scissors aside so she could curtsey to the gentlewoman.

"That is beautiful fabric. It will look stunning on you—wouldn't you agree, Linnea?" Lady Lovland said, picking up the violet fabric and holding it out to her daughter.

Lady Linnea resembled a statue of ice as her mother held the velvet against her blonde hair.

"It will accent the blue of Lady Linnea's eyes," the lady's maid, Jentine, said after several moments of awkward silence. Jentine was an older woman with silver hair and deep smile lines around her mouth. She usually treated Gemma well, probably because she knew Grandmother Guri. "I think it will complement her greatly. An excellent choice, Gemma," Jentine said, giving Gemma a warm smile.

"Thank you, ma'am," Gemma said.

"Which reminds me, I am most pleased with the newest dress you made for Linnea," Lady Lovland said. "The train is quite pretty, and the embroidery around the neckline is beautifully done. Didn't you think so, too, darling?"

Lady Linnea acknowledged the comment with a slight tip of her head.

"Thank you, My Lady," Gemma said, curtsying again.

Lady Linnea went on, imitating a statue and *not* looking at Gemma.

Gemma pushed her blue headband further up her forehead as Lady Linnea all but turned her back to Gemma. "When it is convenient, I shall need to measure Lady Linnea again. I wish to try a new gathering at the waist, and I must be positive my measurements are precise," Gemma said.

"Of course," Lady Lovland said, elegantly flicking her fingers at her daughter. "Linnea is free now, I believe. Will you stay, Linnea?"

Lady Linnea kept her face a perfect mask of porcelain as she curtseyed.

“Wonderful. We will leave you girls to it. Come, Jentine. I can hear little Karl screaming in the nursery. I should collect him, lest he aggravate our guests,” Lady Loveland said.

“Yes, My Lady,” Jentine said, following the elegant lady out of the room.

Gemma listened to their steps fade down the hallway as Lady Linnea stood in the middle of the small room like a carving. When Gemma nudged the door shut, Linnea’s shoulders heaved.

“Finally,” Lady Linnea said, flopping into a chair like a tired child. “I thought I would never be free of Mama this morning. She spent all of breakfast hounding me to improve my *embroidery*,” Lady Linnea said, her face scrunching up.

“What happened to dancing?” Gemma asked, returning to her workbench to start pinning the fabric pieces together.

“She says I’ve mastered it—which is hardly fair, because you are right: some of the more elaborate steps and turns can be used in swordplay. Speaking of which…”

Lady Linnea scrambled out of her chair and ran to the fireplace. A short sword was carefully hidden, tucked into the side of the fireplace. Lady Linnea unsheathed the sword. “I only feel alive when I’m holding a weapon,” she said, reverently holding the sword in front of her.

“Be more careful while practicing, My Lady. That last rip in your dress was in an awkward spot. It was difficult to patch,” Gemma said, threading a needle with ease.

Lady Linnea swept the sword through the air in several different practice moves before she sheathed the sword and thumped across the room to look over Gemma’s shoulder. “No petticoats?” she asked, her voice hopeful.

“No petticoats,” Gemma said. “The gown parts in the front and back. Publically it is to show the lacework on the kirtle, but the kirtle splits in areas where the gown sits.”

“So I will be able to move easier? Gemma, you are a *genius*,” Lady Linnea said, turning away from the workbench, satisfied with Gemma’s explanation. “Mama thinks you might be one of the best seamstresses in Verglas, but she doesn’t even know the brilliant changes you make to your dresses for me,” Lady Linnea said.

The young lady drew a dagger from deep inside the wide sleeves of her dress—Gemma's design, including the dagger sheath stitched into the upper arm—and stuck it in a wood chair to serve as a target before she began thrusting her sword at it in various military maneuvers.

"I'm honored to hear that," Gemma said, the words spilled from her lips automatically as she worked with the velvet material.

"Are the servants and villagers getting after you again?" Lady Linnea said, casting Gemma a sympathetic look over her shoulder before landing a sweeping blow on the abused chair.

"A little. They remain uncreative and repetitive as ever, accusing me of doing little work or nothing at all," Gemma said, cocking her head as she studied the velvet before pawing through a basket of thread spools.

"Ignore them. They're silly nitwits who haven't got a clue how talented you are. Why, Papa was furious when Lady Selberg tried to hire you out from under us for her daughter. Thank you for staying, by the way. I don't know who else would sew pockets in my winter muff for my daggers! I only hope Mama offered to pay you enough."

"More than enough, My Lady."

Lady Linnea attacked the chair for a few more minutes before she sighed and straightened up. "I have some bad news."

"Yes?"

"King Torgen denied Papa's request to return to Loire to continue with his ambassador duties," Lady Linnea said, knitting her hands together as her shoulders fell in an unseemly slump.

Gemma shrugged. "I expected he would."

"You take the news better than I did," Lady Linnea sighed. "I'm dying to leave this place. Loire wouldn't be so bad—Prince Severin runs a *marvelous* military, even if he doesn't allow females to join the army—but Mother would never let me escape from her grasp. She frets too much over my reputation."

"If you ever return to Loire, I imagine she will let up some," Gemma said, comparing threads to the violet fabric. "Wasn't she more relaxed when you lived there?"

"Yes, but that was four years ago—before I grew to a marriageable age. Mama locks me up when we are in Verglas from fear that King Torgen will force me to marry a Verglas noble. She has her heart set on a obtaining a Loire son-in-law," Lady Linnea said, sighing in disgust. "I

would much rather be in Farset. Have I ever told you they have female captains?"

"Several dozen times, My Lady," Gemma acknowledged as she tossed thread spools aside and returned to digging through the basket of spools.

"You're so lucky, Gemma. You don't have to worry about marriage," Lady Linnea said. "I want to leave this frozen place so badly it makes my heart ache."

"It's not so terrible," Gemma said, pausing to look outside. The northern mountains were visible in the bright sunshine. "Our government might be less than desirable, but the country is pretty. I like the Snow Queen's residual magic and the way it makes everything clean and white with snow."

Lady Linnea shivered. "You are part caribou," she said. "I thought you wanted to come to Loire with me?"

"I do," Gemma said. Her sharp, ageless eyes softened to match the childish-ness of her heart-shaped face. "Prince Lucien is said to wear the most daring ensembles, and with Princess Elle established as a fashion idol, it is a wonderful place for a seamstress to visit," she said. She smiled for a moment and added, "That being said, any country would do. I want to see how the Erlauf dressmakers counter Princess Cinderella's red hair, and I've heard incredible stories about the shoemakers of Trieux."

"I should have known you would come with me only because of fashion, not because of our friendship," Lady Linnea said, sliding her sword back in its scabbard. "Unfortunately, it seems we aren't going anywhere."

"We can wait," Gemma said, returning to her work.

"We don't have any other choice *but* to wait. And in the meantime, we're held captive by the desires of a…" Lady Linnea trailed off. She flattened her lips together as she stared at the royal palace. The tower and walls stretched above all the structures in Ostfold. Once it was to hearten the villagers; now it served more as an intimidation technique.

"I have some good news that might brighten your mood," Gemma said, offering the older girl a smile. (It was hard to believe, but Gemma—jaded and sarcastic—was only seventeen. Lady Linnea, bright and full of dreams, was halfway through her eighteenth year.) "I think I've finally found a way to waterproof your cloak."

“Oh *good.* Last time I returned with a wet cloak, I had to tell Mama I stepped under an emptying chamber pot so she wouldn’t study me to see that I had fallen in the river like a drown rat. *That* was embarrassing.”

“I imagine so, My Lady.”

Lady Linnea chatted companionably, discussing foreign armies and the men and women that ruled them, as Gemma started sewing. The pair never dreamed their lives would soon be altered forever.

Chapter 2

Peder the miller was known to be a generally useless man. Although he ground wheat cheaply, the flour he produced was subpar—coarse and prone to mold. His wife was well liked by everyone, and his daughter, Gemma, was nice enough—if not a little stoic and mouthy. Peder, however, was mostly just tolerated and had a reputation as the town drunkard.

It was customary on any given night to find him in the Sno Hauk—that is, the Snow Hawk tavern—in his usual seat at the corner of the dilapidated bar. For the first half hour of his visit, he customarily chugged pints and complained about picky customers. After consuming enough beer to bring a blush to his cheeks, he often tried flirting with the serving girls and (badly) sang duets with the innkeeper's youngest son who had a great way with the fiddle.

If he had enough coin—which was once in a blue moon—he would then partake in a bottle of honey wine. The honey wine always got him roaring and staggering drunk, so everyone, included the barkeep, was glad Peder rarely had the coin to pay for the luxury.

As such, the other Sno Hauk patrons were less than pleased when, one fall evening, Peder plopped his flabby backside on a stool after slaughtering a Verglas folk song and slapped a gold coin on the bar.

"Barkeeper!" Peder shouted, his vowels already drawled by the addling effects of beer. "Your best honey wine!"

The barkeeper, a large, swarthy fellow named Otto, wiped his hands on a ragged cloth. "You've had quite a bit to drink tonight. Ought you not hold on to that coin? You might need it during the winter," Otto said.

"Never," Peder said, a crooked smile planted on his face. "There will be plenty more where this one came from."

"What? How?" Small Tim—who was roughly the size of a bear and was another Sno Hauk regular—asked as Otto held the gold coin up to inspect it in the firelight.

"It's real," Otto said after biting it.

"Gemma," Peder said. "Gave it to her mother—woman can't hide a thing from me. I'm too *smart*," Peder said. He tried to point to his

forehead but instead almost jabbed himself in the eye.

“And how did Gemma come by this great fortune?” Big Tim—a stooped older man who used to be the size of a baby giant but had shrunk in his old age—asked.

“She finished a dress for her great mistress,” Peder said, rolling his eyes. “‘Parrently the lady liked it so much she gave it to her on top of room and board.”

“A gold coin for a *dress*?” Small Tim thundered.

“Yep,” Peder said. “Where’s my honey wine?”

Otto cast the drunkard a look of pity. “Are you sure you do not want to keep it? I doubt Lady Linnea would often repeat such kindness.”

“Nope! Gemma’s getting paid every time now. Some other noble tried hiring her, but the Lovlands like Gemma so much they said they would pay if she stayed,” Peder said, propping his elbows up on the bar. “Now, my honey wine!”

The floor creaked and groaned as Otto disappeared in a back room.

“What do you think Gemma really does for the nobles?” asked Alf—a squinty-eyed man who had an unfortunate resemblance to a weasel.

“I already said she makes dresses,” Peder said, his forehead creasing.

“It is well known that Gemma is the personal seamstress for Lady Linnea,” Big Tom attested.

“You can’t know for certain,” Alf said, eagerly leaning forward. “The young lady rarely leaves her house, so nobody’s ever *seen* these great dresses Gemma is said to make.”

“Stop trying to cause trouble, Alf,” another bar patron warned in a rumbling voice, giving a meaningful glance to the four royal guards who were seated around a table at the back of the room.

“I ain’t causing no trouble!” Alf said. “I’m just saying sweet Gemma might not be the dressmaker she’s lauded to be.”

“Don’t you be doubting my daughter,” Peder declared as Otto set his bottle of honey wine in front of him. He ignored the cup Otto presented him with and took a swig directly from the bottle. “She’s a good girl. I think,” Peder said, blinking as he tried to make his rusty mind work.

“Maybe she’s filling Lady Linnea’s ears with gossip about us common folk,” Alf said.

Peder started to complain, but he was already taking another swig of his wine, which sufficiently distracted him.

Small Tim, taking pity on the girl who wasn't present to defend herself, shook his shaggy head. "I've known Gemma since she was a wee girl. Gemma wouldn't carry tales. If she's not making dresses, it's likely she's being paid to keep the poor Lady Linnea company. The lady has been cooped up for the past few years. She must feel like a stall-bound horse."

"Gemma makes dresses," Big Tim said, firmly. "My granddaughter Sissel works at the Lovland house, and she's seen what Gemma makes. She's a talented girl."

"I won't believe her talent until I see it with my own eyes," Alf said.

"Of course she's talented!" Peder said, smacking his honey wine on the bar with more force than necessary. "She's my daughter! She's so talented, the Lovlands paid her gold coin to stay," Peder said, waving a finger at Alf.

"Like I would believe the words of a drunkard," Alf said with a contemptuous sneer.

"My Gemma has more talent in one hand than you have in your whole self, Alf Skeie!" Peder said. "Why, she's so talented she could work for the King himself!"

"Peder, settle down, and enjoy your drink," Small Tim said, glancing at the soldiers' table.

Alf rolled his eyes. "You're farting with your mouth, Peder."

"You!" Peder roared.

"Peder, be *quiet*, you fool," Big Tim hissed

"No! Not when someone doubts my fortunes!" Peder said.

"I was insulting your daughter," Alf said.

"That, too!" Peder said. "Gemma could turn rags into the finest linen. She'll make me rich!"

"You're just an old, drunk fool with a beggar daughter," Alf said.

"What did you call me?" Peder shouted, staggering into a standing position and knocking a stool over.

The rest of the bar patrons quieted down and looked to see what trouble was brewing.

"You are just jealous. My daughter is so talented she could, she could…she could spin straw into gold!" Peder declared.

Alf snorted and opened his mouth to reply, when a stranger clamped a strong hand on his shoulder.

"What," Alf started, turning around.

A tall man stood behind him. He wore a plain, black cloak with the hood pulled up. Alf couldn't see much of the man's face, but he was harpooned by the man's odd-colored eyes and strong grip. The stranger held himself like a competent man—or worse, someone important.

"A drunkard may utter foolishness in his inebriation, but it is a spiteful fool who goads him on. Shut your mouth, or I will shut it for you in retribution for ruining *my* evening," the stranger said.

"Fine," Alf sulked.

The stranger pushed Alf back in his stool and returned to his spot by the fireplace.

Alf shivered, and Small Tim shrugged. "That's what you get," the bear-man said to Alf.

Peder blinked as he stared at the stranger. "Was that a mage?" he asked.

Otto rolled his eyes. "No, Peder. Go back to your drink," he said.

"My honey wine!" Peder said, gleefully reaching for his bottle.

"Yes, your honey wine. Next time I see Gemma, I will congratulate her," Otto said.

"Hear, hear," Big Tim said, raising his pint.

No one thought any further of Peder's loose mouth. No one except for Alf, who sniveled and sulked over his mug.

"Gemma!"

Gemma glanced behind her before she darted up an alleyway, carefully holding her basket above her head. She had just enough time to crouch behind a stack of wooden crates before two women—Mrs. Hagen and her neighbor, Mrs. Nystrom—peered down the alleyway, looking like vultures with their hooked noses and bobbing heads.

"Gemma! Where did that girl go?" Mrs. Hagen said.

"Perhaps you didn't see her after all?

"I did so! She so resembles a broomstick, you can pick her out of a village gathering with ease."

Behind the crates, Gemma heaved her eyes to the sky.

"That pert girl puts on airs far above her. She thinks she's a seamstress!" Mrs. Hagen sniffed.

“She’s making good money. My husband is friends with Lars Skeilen, and he said Big Tim said Peder the Miller used a gold coin at the Sno Hauk. He claimed Lady Linnea gave it to Gemma for her services,” Mrs. Nystrom said.

“Making money has nothing to do with skill,” Mrs. Hagen snapped. “Lord and Lady Lovland likely see her more as a companion for sweet Lady Linnea.”

“Maybe. You cannot tell me our Gemma made that beautiful hunter green riding habit Lady Linnea was out in not two weeks ago.”

She had, actually. Gemma considered standing up and telling the old harpies so, but it would be a waste of breath; she had endured criticism from all of Ostfold since she first got her seamstress position. So instead, Gemma held in an aggravated sigh and rested her head against the crate.

Go away! Go away! Go away! She thought.

“The scoundrel girl, claiming credit for something that isn’t her work,” Mrs. Hagen said, as if she could hear Gemma’s thoughts.

“What do you expect with a father like Peder?” Mrs. Nystrom asked.

Mrs. Hagen grunted. “I suppose you are right. Hm, is that Malfrid over there?”

“It is. She must be out shopping. I wonder what for…”

“Let’s find out,” Mrs. Hagen suggested.

The older women wandered away from the alley.

Gemma waited for a few extra seconds before she popped upright. “Old goats,” she said, brushing off her skirts with one hand. She kept her basket secure and pressed against her stomach. The basket was covered with worn linen—an old tablecloth ripped up for rags. Gemma pulled the linen snug before she wound her way farther into Ostfold, taking back alleyways to avoid the more quarrelsome residents.

Gemma kept walking, leaving the shopping districts for a residential area that housed most of the farmers, animal herders, and many of the servants employed by the King. In the center of the quiet street was a rustic little house. It was short and squat and had four small fir trees growing on the grass roof—which was normally a bright shade of green but was currently brown with fall.

A sleepy-eyed goat sat on the top of the roof and chewed its cud. Gemma shielded her eyes and called up to the fawn-colored goat, “Are you enjoying the view?”

The goat baaed.

Smoke puffed from the chimney like little clouds, and the shutters were painted a delightful shade of pink.

This was Grandmother Guri's house.

Gemma knocked on the door. "It's Gemma," she called, brushing the nose of the intricately carved reindeer that was posed to prance across the door. The reindeer's nose was smooth and shiny from hundreds of fingers touching it.

"Gemma, my girl! I thought I was about due for a visit. Come in!" a voice inside the house croaked.

Gemma pushed the door open and stepped into the Grandmother Guri's home. The familiar scent of singed wood, goat milk soap, bacon, and kanelgifler—cinnamon rolls—wafted through the air.

Grandmother Guri was stirring a pot. She, like her house, was short and squat. Her long white hair was braided in a halo around her head, and her skin was tan and leathery. She had sharp eyes the color of grey pebbles right after they're pulled from a riverbed, and the softest hands and the gentlest touch.

"How are you, Grandmother?" Gemma asked as she set her basket on a table and removed her shawl from her shoulders.

"Good, very good! I would be doing better if Jo-Jo would stop eating my linen napkins in her sleep. Do you hear that, you wretched goat?" Grandmother Guri said, using a broom to hit one of the support beams holding up the roof.

Jo-Jo baaed, a sound that was audible even through the greenery growing on the house.

"What cheese are you making?" Gemma asked, eyeing the bubbling pot.

"Prim. I would offer you tea, but I can't heat a thing until the prim sets into a spread. Would you like milk? Jo-Jo dropped some before she hauled her fat udders onto my roof."

"Yes, please," Gemma said, sitting down on a rickety but comfortable wooden chair that was smooth with use. Everything in Grandmother Guri's house was well-made and old, but majestically beautiful.

"I brought you something," Gemma said, reaching into her basket.

"Oh?" Grandmother Guri said, squinting in Gemma's direction.

“A jar of Bard’s applesauce,” Gemma said, placing the jar on the table. “I know it’s your favorite.”

“It is. As I always say, ‘It takes a worm to know an apple.’ Thank you, my girl!” Grandmother Guri said, setting Gemma’s mug of milk on the table.

“Of course.”

“So, you need help with something?”

“What makes you think that?” Gemma asked, sipping the rich goat milk.

“I may be old, but I’m not stupid. That applesauce is a bribe if I ever saw one. What has you troubled?”

“Can’t I just come to visit you?” Gemma said, tilting her head as she studied the older woman who had taught her so much.

“Not unless you’re planning to have a picnic on that mighty fine velvet you have in there,” Grandmother Guri said, sticking her head into Gemma’s basket. “That color will set off Linnea’s hair just right.”

“You think so, too?” Gemma said, her joy breaking through her bland mask, making her smile in delight.

“Mmm, of course. You have my eye for color. Now, what’s the problem?”

“I need the gown—the velvet—to fluff out without the extra volume of the kirtle.”

“My girl, even that noble miss of yours has got to have a kirtle. She can’t go running around like a naked jay bird.”

“I never said she wouldn’t have a kirtle,” Gemma said, not at all scandalized by the phrase that would make most fair maidens blush appealingly. (As previously mentioned, Grandmother Guri had taught her *so* much. The older woman’s blunt way of speaking stopped shocking Gemma before she was old enough to reach the reindeer carving on the door.) “But I want to make the dress more mobile, so I planned to make slits in the side. However, I’m not certain the skirts will fill out then.”

“I see. So she’s still a bloodthirsty miss, then?” Grandmother Guri asked, lifting the violet velvet out of the basket.

“She wants to join the army, yes.”

“Whatever floats your apples. Even nobles are entitled to happiness,” Grandmother Guri said. “Get my sewing basket, would you?”

Gemma ran around the table to pick up the *massive* basket that was weighed down with threads, scissors, needles, pin cushions, and kinds of sewing materials. After she set down the basket, she retrieved an oil lamp to shed more light on the material.

Grandmother Guri was not related to her—Gemma's family was one of the few that was *not* distantly tied to the clever woman—but ever since Grandmother Guri found Gemma crying in a corner of the mill when Guri was coming to pick up her flour order, Grandmother Guri was a part of Gemma's family. The older woman gave Gemma little gifts for her birthday and the holidays, wiped Gemma's tears, and mended her hurts. Grandmother Guri even gave Gemma the skill and passion that drove her. She taught Gemma how to sew and continued to help her with the beautiful but complex dress patterns Gemma designed.

Even if the majority of those in Ostfold didn't believe in Gemma's skills at sewing, Grandmother Guri did. And Grandmother Guri was more than enough for Gemma.

Gemma drank her milk and watched her teacher fold the cloth.

"If I'm picturing it right, I think you'll be fine. The slits shouldn't compromise the volume too much, unless you're planning to cut actual chunks out?"

"I thought of it, but that seemed like it would be too obvious."

"It would. No, your idea should work well. You'll do drooping cuffs?"

"Lined with white fur, yes."

Grandmother Guri nodded in approval. "It should be a pretty sight when you finish it," Grandmother Guri said, frowning up at the ceiling when Jo-Jo baaed.

"Thank you," Gemma said. The faint uptick of her lip betrayed how pleased she was.

"Now. How's your love life?"

"What?"

"I didn't say it loud enough? HOW IS YOUR LOVE LIFE?"

"Grandmother," Gemma frowned.

"Hm? You're a young and pretty thing; you're allowed to be in love. Mind you, I'm not sure I know any strapping young men who could match you well," Grandmother Guri said as she lowered herself into a cushioned chair.

“Match me…” Gemma stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Grandmother Guri had explained the saying to her a hundred times.

“Love is like a pair of horses. They need the same gaits and to be going in the same direction. Our Ostfold boys are handsome, but I don’t think none of ‘em are heading in the same direction as you,” Grandmother Guri said, tilting her head so she looked like a curious owl.

“I don’t want marriage right now. I don’t feel particularly inclined to have children, either,” Gemma said.

“I suppose you’ve had the experience already, taking care of your parents as you have,” Grandmother Guri said, squinting up at her roof as the muffled footfalls of her goat moved across the house. “Oh—snow beans! If you want an easier but equally as thankless task, get a goat,” she advised. “Jo-Jo! You get away from that chimney this instant!” Grandmother Guri shouted.

Gemma finished her milk, her eyes crinkling with untold humor.

“Still, I am surprised no young men have taken to flexing their muscles at you,” Grandmother Guri said.

Gemma snorted. “With the town as critical of my job as it is? Any son that looked twice at me would be paddled by his mama.”

“You’re too critical.”

“You always say a critical person is a sign of weak bones.”

“It is. I wish you wouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“You also say if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.”

Grandmother Guri swatted a hand in Gemma’s direction. “You need to start listening to the *important* things I say, my girl!”

“Everything you say is important, Grandmother.”

Grandmother Guri gave a great cackle of laughter. “I wish you realized that as a child,” she hooted, but her smile was pleased. “I’m glad you have dreams, my girl. You are a talented seamstress—better than I am, in fact.”

“Grandmother, no—,”

“Now, now, I can recognize a gift when I see it. It’s true. You have a mind for patterns and clothes I have never seen. I would hate to see you waste it, but I would also hate to see you throw love away if you happen to find your matching partner.”

“I’m not going to find anyone in Ostfold, Grandmother.”

“When did I say you had to? Hm? I didn’t! No, what I mean is…you are driven, Gemma. You might not realize you’re looking at your love

until it's too late. So while I'm glad you don't act like a silly girl and swoon over every boy your age…just be open to it."

"Be open to being silly?" Gemma pertly said, her eyebrow jutted up in a look of disbelief that Grandmother Guri often wore.

"No," Grandmother Guri said, smacking Gemma upside the head. "Be open to love!"

"Fine, I will. But Grandmother, I am telling you it will take a man of *magic* to love me."

"Don't make such oaths, my girl," Grandmother Guri chortled. "Life has a funny way of twisting things."

"As you say. So, about the dress…"

Chapter 3

“Come in,” Gemma said when there was a knock on her workshop door.

The door swung open. “Oh! My apologies, Gemma, My Lady,” Sissel said when she got a look inside the room. Lady Linnea was as still as a portrait painting, looking out the window. Gemma stepped around the dummy Lady Linnea’s dress hung from. The violet gown was almost finished—Gemma was merely fussing with the fur cuffs on the wide, drooping sleeves—but the elaborately embroidered kirtle was barely started.

“Excuse me. I will return,” Sissel said, almost stumbling over her feet in her effort to flee.

“Your timing is perfect, Sissel. I have something for you,” Gemma said, retreating to a chest of drawers.

“What?” Sissel asked, lingering in the doorway out of curiosity.

“Here,” Gemma said, pulling out what appeared to be a shawl. It was made of small squares of blue and purple fabric—Lady Linnea’s favorite colors—and was warm and thick.

“Yes?” Sissel blinked when Gemma held the shawl out.

“It’s for you,” Gemma said. “I had it mostly finished before I measured you, but I needed to make sure it was long enough.”

Sissel stared at the shawl—a patchwork of expensive, beautifully patterned fabric. “I can’t. It’s too grand for the likes of me. Besides, what would My Lady say?” Sissel whispered, her eyes darting in Lady Linnea’s direction.

“I made it with fabric scraps that are too small to use any other way. I was being thrifty. You wear it like this,” Gemma said, looping the shawl around Sissel’s shoulders and neck. “There are three buttons, here, here, and here, so it will stay on your shoulders and leave your hands free,” Gemma said, buttoning the shawl.

“Thank you, Gemma. It’s beautiful—I’ve never owned anything so *soft*,” Sissel said, reaching up to stroke a square patch.

“You’re welcome,” Gemma said. “Did you need something?”

“I came to check on the fire,” Sissel said, sticking her neck out like a turtle so she could see Gemma’s fireplace without entering the room. “I thought I might clean it out, but it wouldn’t be right to do that with Lady Linnea present,” Sissel added, her voice lower than a whisper.

“Come back in half an hour. She has embroidery lessons then,” Gemma said. “And thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

“No, thank you,” Sissel repeated, pressing her shawl to her cheek. She glanced at Lady Linnea and gave a wobbly curtsey before she hurried away.

Gemma shut the door when the scullery maid disappeared down the hallway.

“You are a fool,” Lady Linnea said.

“Am I?” Gemma asked, returning to the violet gown.

“If you sold clothing items like that to the people who questioned your talent, the nasty rumors about your abilities would be silenced,” Lady Linnea said, turning so she could lean against the wall in a most unlady-like manner. “Instead you *give* such things—which *should* be costly and pricy—away to scullery maids and stable boys.”

“That stable boy is keeping it a secret from your mother that you occasionally slip out and ride. He deserved the coat, My Lady,” Gemma said, inspecting her stitches.

“Maybe, but what about the goose girl? Or that baby blanket you made for one of your father’s customers?” Lady Linnea said before she shook her head. “These people should act as your champions. Instead they closet your workmanship away like they were made of gold.”

“Perhaps. But I am well fed and well paid. I have a job I love. I may find the doubts and rumors irksome, but I would rather sew for those who need it and deserve it than raise my esteem in the eyes of people I don’t like and frankly don’t care about,” Gemma said, snipping a loose thread with a scissors.

Lady Linnea tilted her head as she thought. “I redact my comment from before. You are not a fool. Instead, you are filled with an unspeakably horrid amount of good will.”

Gemma scoffed. “Do you know me at all?”

Lady Linnea flopped her upper body on a workbench. “I think your cynical expressions and unrelenting pessimism—,”

“I’m practical and realistic, My Lady, not pessimistic.”

“—hide your gooey, warm feelings. You, Gemma, are exactly like a hedgehog. Or a porcupine.”

“I’m not sure I would ever apply the word ‘gooey’ to an animal covered in quills,” Gemma said.

Lady Linnea smiled, but she wiped the sign of mirth off her face when someone knocked on the workroom door.

“Come in,” Gemma said.

A footman opened the door. He offered a bow in Lady Linnea’s direction. “Lady Linnea,” he murmured before addressing Gemma. “If you would come downstairs with me, please.”

“What’s wrong?” Gemma asked. Had her father gotten drunk and lost somewhere in the city, again?

The footman flatted his lips. He glanced at Lady Linnea and leaned forward to whisper, “A squad of royal guards is here to escort you to the palace.”

“Why?” Gemma said, standing up straighter.

“They would not say.”

“Gemma is being summoned?” Lady Linnea said, her adopted persona briefly failing her at the footman’s words.

“Yes, My Lady,” the footman said, bowing at Lady Linnea.

“Do Mama and Papa know?” Lady Linnea asked. Although her face was smooth like cream, worry accented the noble edge to her voice.

“They are aware, My Lady. I believe Lord Lovland means to go to the palace, as well,” the footman said.

“Very well,” Lady Linnea said, blowing out of the room without further notice, a vision in her ivy green dress.

Gemma shut her eyes. When she opened them, she had a solid grip on her composure. “I will get my cloak,” she said, retreating into her workroom to snatch up a plain, brown cloak. She settled it on her shoulders before she nodded to the footman.

The footman led her through the manor, all the way to the front entrance.

“Have strength,” the footman whispered to Gemma before he bowed to Lord Lovland. “Miss Kielland, My Lord,” he said, backing away.

Lord Lovland was on the slender side. Lady Linnea inherited her tallness from the lord, but the man was more scholar than warrior. He had

a kind face, which was covered with a strawberry-blonde beard and was creased with worry.

"Gemma, the King has requested your presence in the palace," Lord Lovland said. "As your employer, I will follow you," he hesitated and turned to the guards. "Miss Kielland will join you in a moment," he said.

Sensing the dismissal behind the words, the squadron bowed to Lord Lovland and trooped through the doors. The footman closed the door behind them.

"Have you done *anything* to bring the King's attention to you? Anything at all?" Lord Lovland asked, his voice low pitched and urgent.

"No," Gemma said, her words firm and certain.

Lord Lovland inhaled. "Then this may involve Linnea. I worried when he denied our request to return to Loire…Gemma, I beg you to protect Linnea. You must step carefully in what you say to him. The King is a madman."

"My Lord," Gemma said, taken aback by Lord Lovland's frankness.

"He is, and the smallest thing might set him off with a desire to see you killed. He is worse than a wild, rabid bear. Do you remember early last fall?"

Gemma grimly nodded.

"Princess Elise's near death may be your fate if you displease him. Do not be clever; do not be memorable. If the King means to keep an eye on you, I cannot protect you," Lord Lovland said. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, My Lord," Gemma said.

"Good girl. Off you go," Lord Lovland said, stepping aside. The footman opened the door and escorted Gemma out.

The guards had brought a cart, into which they helped Gemma climb before they set off to the palace, the cart horses moving at a steady trot. Naturally, the guards took the most direct route, which wound through Ostfold. Civilians stopped and stared as the cart rolled through the streets. Some people looked at Gemma and her armed escort with sympathy. Others crossed themselves or whispered to their neighbors. A few sneered.

Gemma ignored the reactions and grimly steeled herself. No matter what awaited her, it was never good to be called to King Torgen's attention. After what seemed like both an eternity and a second, the urban area of Ostfold peeled back, revealing the Verglas Royal Palace.

The palace, built during the Snow Queen's time, was made to resemble ice and winter. Every part of the castle jutted up into triangular cut-outs that were intricately decorated with snowflakes and the royal family crest —a reindeer. The only tower in the castle was tall and skinny, and it was angled to get a perfect view of the mountains that unfolded behind the palace.

Gemma was stone still as the cart rolled through the palace gates. When it stopped, a guard helped Gemma down. The rest of the guards fell into ranks around her, herding her into the castle.

The interior was gloomy and dark, matching Gemma's mood. The King must be summoning Gemma about Lady Linnea. Perhaps Lord Lovland was right, and he wanted insider information about her—or maybe he meant to hire her to watch Lady Linnea? Gemma bit down on her tongue to clear her mind as the guards escorted her into the throne room.

The throne room was a beautiful masterpiece that overlooked Lake Sno —the snow-fed lake located at the back of the palace. There were two thrones: a central one for the current monarch, which was made of wood and blue velvet and placed on top of a marble dais, and a second one made of glass and crafted to resemble ice. The ice throne was positioned in the far back of the room, facing the lake view instead of the throne room. Tradition said it was occupied by the Snow Queen when she lived, and it hadn't been moved out of reverence.

The floor was marble covered with blue rugs accented with snowflakes and reindeer, and the sunlight sparkled when it hit the silver-glass- and gold-work at the opposite side of the room, which was crafted to resemble a winter scene.

But Gemma didn't see any of the beauty of the gorgeous room because when she stepped inside it and took note of those who were present, her worry increased tenfold.

Kneeling before the throne was her sloppy father. Her mother was on the sidelines, squished between an army of clerks, record keepers, and scholars.

This isn't about Lady Linnea, Gemma realized as she stared at her father, who couldn't even meet her gaze. *It's about me*.

"Gemma Kielland, My Lord," a guard said, bowing to the king.

“Very good,” King Torgen said, folding his hands over the expanse of his belly.

King Torgen was considered comely in his younger days, but years of hatred, spite, and madness had hardened his features and gave every part of his face the shadow of cruelty. His eyes were the worst. The whites were a sickly yellow, and the dark irises glowed with fires of hatred and insanity. Gemma had seen him before for public spectacles and events, but she had never before born the weight of King Torgen’s sickly, feverish eyes.

“I’ve heard about you, Gemma Kielland…and your unusual ability to spin straw into gold.”

WHAT? Gemma felt her muscles go slack. She must have misheard him. “I beg your pardon, My Lord, my ability to what?”

“To spin straw into gold. I have received a report that your father has run his mouth off singing of your fortunes,” King Torgen said, a mean smile spreading on his lips.

Gemma looked to her father. His head was hanging, and he didn’t look up. Judging by his pasty complexion, he was still half drunk. Gemma snapped her eyes to her mother, the parent whom she had given her extra wages.

Gemma’s mother stared at her feet with puffy eyes and shaking shoulders—declaring her guilt as plainly as Gemma’s father. Gemma’s mother—whom everyone near and far declared a sweet, kind woman—apparently didn’t have the strength to hold onto the bit of help Gemma could offer her.

“There’s been a misunderstanding, My Lord,” Gemma said.

“A misunderstanding? You mean to say you cannot do it?” King Torgen asked.

If I could, do you think my parents would be living in ***squalor****?* Gemma thought. She took a moment to prepare herself, but before she could respond King Torgen continued.

“If that is the case, and your father has lied, I will be forced to order both of you be put to death,” King Torgen said.

Gemma paused, her breath leaving her.

Gemma’s mother made a mewling noise and started crying. The few villagers that were present exchanged looks and whispers.

“He has wasted my time—which I find to be priceless—and, therefore, must be forced to face the consequences of his lies…should that be the case. You are merely collateral damage, I suppose. One must set an example for the kingdom,” King Torgen said.

Gemma turned around, searching the villagers for a friendly face. Everyone avoided looking at her, and Gemma saw a dark green cloak she knew belonged to Lord Lovland retreat to the back of the room.

He wasn’t going to help her.

As the situation didn’t directly involve Lady Linnea, the Lovlands weren’t going to stick their necks out and bring possible destruction on themselves by drawing King Torgen’s attention.

Gemma would be sacrificed, killed by her father’s stupidity and the inaction of others.

“Gemma, Gemma no!” Gemma’s mother said as she staggered through the crowd. “I can’t lose both of you. W-what will I d-do?” she said, hooking her fingers on Gemma’s cloak and collapsing to her knees in a mess of mindless sobs. “Gemma!”

As Gemma dispassionately looked down at her panicked mother, she knew without a doubt that if she told King Torgen her father had lied, claiming the death sentence for herself and her father, her mother would not long survive them.

“N-not both of them, p-p-please!” Gemma’s mother said, raising her eyes to the ceiling.

Gemma ignored her mother’s cries as she weighed her options. Either way Gemma was going to die, but was it worth it to see her father killed for getting her into this mess as well? Should she say yes to spare him—to spare her mother?

“Well? Did he lie?” King Torgen asked.

Gemma sucked in a gasp of air as she considered her response. She loved her mother. Things looked grim, but just maybe…

Gemma glared at her father with her ice-eyes, hating him more than ever as she said, “No, My Lord, but he was mistaken.”

“Oh?” King Torgen said, leaning back in his throne.

“Yes. I cannot spin straw into gold because straw cannot be spun into anything; it hasn’t the right fibers,” Gemma said. Everyone in the room held their breath for a deathly moment of silence before Gemma continued, “But I can spin flax into gold.”

“Thank you, Gemma! T-thank you!” Gemma’s mother said, pulling on her cloak.

Gemma ignored her mother and stared King Torgen in the eye. Having just sacrificed herself for her father—whom she didn’t much like—and her mother—whose weak will chafed Gemma—she was not feeling charitable. Even though she was going to try and survive this, luck was not on her side. Only one person had ever evaded death when King Torgen ordered it, and such an order was a fairly frequent event.

“I see. And how do you do it?” King Torgen asked.

Gemma pressed her lips together before she responded. “The flax must be freshly cut from the fields, dried, and the seeds removed. After which —,”

“The plant must be harvested, I understand. Then, you spin it into gold?” King Torgen said, waving a hand to dismiss Gemma’s unspoken words.

“Not yet,” Gemma was quick to say. “The fibers must be harvested from the flax. The plant must go through the breaking, scutching, and heckling process to remove chaff and properly groom the fiber.”

Seizing the only glimmer of hope she had, Gemma continued, “Additionally, my magic must be performed away from any eyes and only at night. Moonlight must be allowed to shine on me as I work, or the results will not be permanent.”

Maybe Gemma could escape. King Torgen would surely demand a demonstration. With the limits she just set, he would be forced to leave her alone, at night, in a room with a window.

“I presume you would prefer to do the harvesting, breaking, scutching, and heckling yourself?” King Torgen asked, his voice oily.

“The gold would be of higher caliber,” Gemma said, kicking herself for not thinking of that requirement earlier. The longer she dragged the process out, the more time she had to think of a way to escape!

“Perhaps in the future. For now, I will be satisfied with low-quality gold,” King Torgen said, his smile gleeful.

He *knew* Gemma was lying through her teeth. Everyone knew it! It wasn’t possible for a normal girl to spin flax into gold, or the magicians and enchanters would have plucked her up as a child!

“Forgive me, My Lord, but I, your lowly subject, must remind you that I cannot work my magic in public,” Gemma said, her voice strong.

“Yes, of course. My guards will prepare a room with the specifications you have marked out. Until then, I will hold you in my dungeons, lest there be a *misunderstanding*,” King Torgen said. “Guards!”

“Gemma!” Gemma’s mother cried.

The six guards that escorted Gemma into the throne room moved into formation around her, stepping between Gemma and her mother before herding her out. Gemma could hear her mother’s sobs and the whispers of all present as they left the throne room behind. Eventually the guards led her down a winding staircase into the depths of the wooden castle.

The deeper they went, the more Gemma’s dread built.

King Torgen’s dungeons were known for the terrors that happened in them. It was an awful place built out of black stone. All light sources seemed to sputter in the terrible darkness, snuffed out by the horror of the place.

The guards escorted Gemma into a cell. There was nothing in it, but along the way—without Gemma noticing—the guards had plucked up various items they set down inside the cell. One dropped a small wooden stool, another a worn but thick blanket. A third soldier set down a bucket of water, and the fourth placed a cloak down on the ground.

“You acted with honor, Miss,” one of the soldiers said as the others filed out of the cell. “I’m sorry we can’t give you more.”

Gemma folded her lips into a smile with great difficulty. “Thank you,” she said before the soldier shut the door.

With the soldiers gone, Gemma was left alone in the oppressive silence. She stood on the stool to try to look outside—there was a window set in the ceiling covered with a metal grate that let her see bits of the cloudy sky, and two palace walls. She tried half-heartedly pulling on the grate of the ceiling-window, but it didn’t budge.

“I didn’t think it would be easy to get out of here,” Gemma said, walking the small perimeter of the underground cell. “My real chance will come when the King imprisons me to do the spinning.”

To conserve energy, Gemma sat on the folded cloak and closed her eyes, leaning against the wall of the cell. The air was chilly outside, and the dungeon was perversely cool, so Gemma wrapped herself in the warm blanket and buried her nose in the cloth to try and block out the sewage smell of the prison.

Hours passed, and the morning sunlight disappeared. Gemma guessed it was late afternoon when there was a heavy thump of something hitting the ground above Gemma's cell.

"Gemma Kielland! If you aren't in *this* cell I'm going to strangle you myself when I find you. I just ripped my second-best gown climbing that wretched wall!"

Gemma rocketed from her blanket cocoon. "Lady Linnea?" she asked, her voice incredulous.

A shadow was cast on the floor of her cell as the blonde-haired noblewoman leaned over the ceiling-window. "So you are here, good! I nearly dislocated my arm checking the ten empty cells surrounding you before this. Each cell is individually walled in; can you imagine the stupidity of that? Our taxes at work, I suppose. Why didn't you rip off a piece of your dress and hang it from the window like a good captive? I would have been able to figure out where you were when I tried spying you out from an upper window this morning," Lady Linnea peevishly said.

"Because I didn't think anyone would help me," Gemma said, climbing the stool so she could properly address the lady.

"I'm sorry," Lady Linnea said, the anger gone from her voice. "I-I tried talking to Papa. He wouldn't listen," she said, gripping an iron bar with a hand that trembled in anger. "You've been a loyal servant, and he's willing to *abandon* you."

"I can't blame him. It's safer for your family. Not to mention it is *my* father's fault I am in this mess."

"I will not allow you to be left behind," Lady Linnea said, stubbornly tucking her head.

"Thank you," Gemma said, touched by the fiery lady's words. "Even if you cannot free me, I thank you."

"Cannot free you? Just who do you think I am?" Lady Linnea scoffed. "Farset wouldn't let me into their army if I couldn't break you out of here!"

"Then you have a plan?"

Lady Linnea's plans were frequent. Their success, however, was rare.

Lady Linnea drooped. "I did. After I discovered where you were being kept, I was going to smuggle in a weapon for you. It is to my shame that I must admit I took too long in finding you. I'm not certain I can travel

home, obtain a proper weapon, and return here before my parents realize I am gone."

With Lady Linnea's disappointment practically tangible, Gemma felt obligated to encourage her and say, "It was a good plan."

"Yes, but now I will have to use my backup plan. Something I didn't want to do."

"You're not going to approach the King," Gemma said. (One could never be certain with Lady Linnea.)

"No," Lady Linnea said to Gemma's relief. "I'm going to seek out Prince Toril."

"*WHAT*?" Gemma hissed.

"I have to go. I need to catch him before he is called to dinner with his father. Wish me luck!"

"I will wish you no such thing. Lady Linnea!" Gemma said when Lady Linnea momentarily disappeared from view. The lady reappeared when she climbed high enough up the wall that Gemma could see her again.

"When this is over, I insist you make me a new second-best dress."

"*Lady Linnea*!"

"Ta, ta!" Lady Linnea said, kicking her legs over the wall and jumping to the other side.

Gemma rubbed her forehead. "Grandmother Guri was right. Instead of having children *or* friends, I should have gotten a goat. If she gets herself killed, I won't forgive her!"

After a tip off from a gossipy lady's maid, Lady Linnea found Prince Toril moping on a bench placed near the shore of Lake Sno.

Lady Linnea smoothed her usual polite mask over her face and approached the prince with all the elegance she could muster. She could do this. She *had* to do this. Gemma was counting on her.

"Prince Toril," Lady Linnea said in a soft, whispering voice that she used because it was an audible representation of the caress of silk on skin. "I must beg your pardon for intruding, but I am in a terrible plight. I need your help."

Prince Toril looked away from the lake long enough to glance at her. "What do you want?" he sighed.

Gritting her teeth, Lady Linnea tried curtsying. “My name is Lady Linnea Lovland. Your father has imprisoned my servant. He means to kill her if she cannot spin flax into gold—a feat most impossible for *all*—even a mage.”

Prince Toril crossed his legs at the ankles. “So?”

“So I ask that you would save my servant. Please, intervene! If you do, I will forever be in your debt,” Lady Linnea said, tilting her head so Toril was treated to the most fetching angle of her face.

“No,” Prince Toril said.

Lady Linnea placed a hand over her heart. “But why not? If you spoke to your father, I know he would release her.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about you; I don’t care about your servant; I just don’t care. Now leave me be,” Prince Toril said, looking out at the lake.

Lady Linnea blinked. She had always been told Toril was a dimwit, but that he was at least kinder than his father. The general population *lived* for the day his father died, and he would take over. What had him huffy?

“You cannot mean that, Prince. We are your subjects,” Lady Linnea persisted.

“Yes? Well, I hurt too,” Prince Toril said, standing up and running a frustrated hand through his hair. “I have loved and lost the pinnacle of females: Princess Elise of Arcainia. She will never have me, and so nothing matters! If you will excuse me,” Prince Toril said, striding down to the lake waters.

The water was icy cold, so the prince didn’t dare walk in. Instead, he settled for moodily trekking down the shoreline.

Lady Linnea watched him go with a scowl. Everyone in Verglas had heard about Prince Toril’s fancy for the Arcainian princess, but Lady Linnea had thought he would be over the worst of his heartache by now!

Lady Linnea chased after the Prince, picking up a fallen tree branch that had quite a bit of heft to it. “Prince Toril,” she called.

The prince didn’t stop. He continued his moping walk.

She glanced over her shoulder when they rounded a bend in the shoreline that took them out of sight of the palace, screening them behind trees. As soon as it was safe, Lady Linnea ran the remaining distance to the prince and smacked the branch on top of his head.

The branch broke, and Prince Toril fell like a sack of potatoes.

“What was that for?” Toril groaned as he tried to pick himself up.

“Listen, you imbecile,” Lady Linnea said as she plopped down and grabbed the prince by the collar of his shirt. “I don’t care about your failed romantic dalliances. In fact, after seeing you mope like a spineless swineherd, it’s no wonder she rejected you! What I care about is my seamstress, and she’s going to be killed by your bloodthirsty father. I will **not** let that happen!”

“W-what?” Prince Toril stammered.

“Are you addled? Do you not understand the words I am speaking most plainly? Fine. Then I will put it in terms you can understand: SAVE. MY. SERVANT. OR. ELSE!” Lady Linnea said, shaking the prince.

Prince Toril stared at her with bug eyes and didn’t respond.

Lady Linnea released his shirt collar and pushed him back to the ground in disgust. “Gutless twit,” she muttered. “Shouldn’t have placed any kind of hope in such a *rotten* royal family—the Snow Queen must be rolling in her grave.”

“Sorry,” Prince Toril muttered.

“This is what happens when one doesn’t make it obligatory for the royal sons to serve in the military,” Lady Linnea said, standing and brushing the skirt of her dress off. She took a moment to bite her lip. She was failing Gemma. She needed to pull herself together! This was the kind of adventure she longed for…but she never thought it would be her close friend at stake.

“Perhaps I am not so sorry,” Prince Toril stiffly said as he stood.

Lady Linnea turned her back to the prince. What could she do? Perhaps she could find a saw and hack at the bars over the dungeon window? But that might be too loud.

“Lady, you will hear me out,” Prince Toril said.

Maybe she could poison the guards or give them a sleeping tonic? “That’s ridiculous; poison would be impossible to track down at such an hour. It’s best to make those kinds of purchases in the morning,” Lady Linnea said.

“Lady!”

“What do *you* want,” Lady Linnea said, her voice withering when she realized the Prince was attempting to speak to her.

“You, ma’am, have been very rude. You act as if my broken heart is a mere flesh wound,” Prince Toril said.

“Well it is, isn’t it?” Lady Linnea snapped.

“What?” Prince Toril said, sounding incredulous.

“You could have *FOLLOWED* this precious princess of yours to Arcainia. But did you? No! You prefer to mope and sulk about the country for a *year* like a boy denied sweets! She still isn’t married is she?” Lady Linnea said, putting her hands on her hips.

“No, but she loves—,”

Lady Linnea cut him off, chopping her hand as if slicing through his words. “Excuses,” she said. “If you really loved this girl, you would desperately try to woo her right now—even if she loved another. Hope isn’t lost until she says her vows! Or if you really wish to be despondent, you can dwell upon your terrible shortcomings—a long list, if you ask me—which is probably why she told you to bugger off. I recommend you begin with your inability to think of others. Now leave. I am trying to plan a prison break, and your nattering is not aiding me.”

Prince Toril was either struck dumb by Lady Linnea’s insight, or he was too stupid to respond—Lady Linnea suspected it was the latter—so he only gaped at her.

Lady Linnea gave an aggravated sigh and rolled her eyes before she started walking up the shoreline, meandering in the direction of the palace. “Perhaps I could find a key to her cell?” she muttered.

“Wait!”

“But I believe it has to be open from outside the cell. I will never be able to smuggle myself down there.”

“Lady Linnea, please wait!”

“What is it?” Lady Linea said, placing her hands on her hips.

Prince Toril jogged the few paces between them.

“Well? Time is of the essence, and I would prefer to waste none of it on *you*,” Lady Linnea said, tapping her foot.

“You said your servant has been imprisoned by my father?”

“Yes,” Lady Linnea said, some of the bite fading from her manners.

“Why?”

“I already told you. He wants her to spin flax into gold.”

“Yes, but why would he demand such a thing of her in the first place?”

“Whilst in an inebriated state, her foolish father said she could do it. When it is proven that she cannot, King Torgen will kill her,” Lady Linnea said.

Prince Toril nodded and rubbed his eyes with his hand. “Yes.”

“…Yes?”

“I will help you,” he said, glancing at the sky, which was painted dusty pink by the setting sun.

Lady Linnea eyed Prince Toril. “Why?”

“Why?”

“Why the sudden change? Not five minutes ago, you were as limp as a dead fish washed ashore. Now you are willing to help?” Lady Linnea asked, trying to unobtrusively study his head for blood. Perhaps she hit him with the branch too hard?

Prince Toril took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “It’s because you’re correct.”

“Of course I am,” Lady Linnea scoffed.

“If Princess Elise knew that I turned away someone looking for my help, she would be horrified. In my heartbreak, I have become the kind of man she despises.”

“Stupid?” Lady Linnea offered.

Prince Toril frowned. “Complacent.”

“Oh.”

“So, where is this servant of yours?”

“In the dungeons.”

“Then we should start there.”

“I quite agree,” Lady Linnea said, starting for the palace. “And…thank you,” she added more than a little awkwardly.

Prince Toril blinked. “For?”

“For helping.”

Prince Toril cleared his voice. “Of course,” he said.

They hurried to the dungeons as the sun started to sink behind the horizon. When they cleared the last step into the oppressive place, a guard standing duty shook his head.

“The servant girl?” Prince Toril said.

“You are a moment too late, My Lord. King Torgen had her taken to her to a room full of flax,” the guard said.

“Then we will find her and claim her there. Do you know where they went?” Prince Toril asked.

The guard shook his head. “I’m afraid not, My Lord. But you will need to speak to your Father to free her.”

“Why?” Lady Linnea asked, her mask of temperance and serenity back as she clasped her hands together.

“Because she’s locked up, and King Torgen is the only one with the key,” the guard said.

Lady Linnea went as white as a snow. She reached out and placed a hand on the dungeon wall to stabilize herself.

“I see. Thank you,” Prince Toril said to the guard.

“Of course, My Lord.”

“Come,” Prince Toril said, taking Lady Linnea’s elbow and guiding her along.

“I can’t leave her,” Lady Linnea whispered. Desperation permeated her words.

“No,” Prince Toril agreed. “But you can’t hang about the palace the entire night either. Return home. I will speak to my father. Your servant will not die, I promise.”

Lady Linnea wasn’t exactly reassured, as Prince Toril was as terrifying as butterflies. But he was right: her reputation would not recover if she gadded about the palace unaccompanied after dark. She would go home to gather additional resources and return in the morning.

“Very well. I must thank you further, My Lord, Prince Toril,” Lady Linnea said when they left the terrible dungeon staircase and emerged in the palace.

“Thank *you*, Lady Linnea. You have helped me more than you know,” Prince Toril said, bowing over her hand.

Lady Linnea wanted to roll her eyes at the prince’s dramatics, but she didn’t. Idiot or not, if Prince Toril saved Gemma, Lady Linnea would be his most loyal subject ever.

Chapter 4

Gemma stared at the wads of flax dusting the room. There wasn't as much as she expected. Bundled up, it was roughly the size of a rectangular hay-bale. The small amount was most likely because King Torgen knew she would fail at the task.

The flax fibers were a shade of dirty cream and smelled like the outdoors.

"Set to work, Gemma Kielland," King Torgen said, pushing the wheel of the spinning wheel so it clacked and rotated. "And if, by tomorrow morning, you have not spun this flax into gold, I will have you beheaded," he said, giving Gemma a dark smile that made her skin crawl. "Work well," he said. He started laughing as he headed for the door.

The three guards accompanying King Torgen gave Gemma pitying looks before they followed their master out of the room.

King Torgen was still laughing when she heard the ominous thud of a bar falling into place over the door and a loud clank as the room was locked from the outside.

Gemma shook her head when King Torgen's laughter faded as the monarch walked away.

"Right," Gemma said, lifting her chin up and setting her shoulders. "Time to try escaping."

Gemma walked the perimeter of the room, ignoring the panic coiled in her stomach like a snake as she knocked on the walls and peered out of the window.

The room was plain. It was the size of Gemma's workroom back in Loveland manor, but empty and barren. Besides the flax, a chair, the spinning wheel, several oil lamps, a little pot of water to use for wetting the fibers, and a cup of water to drink—probably provided by one of the guards—there was nothing else in the room.

The window was stomach height—which boded well—but the view from it revealed that the room was three floors above the ground.

This narrowed down Gemma's escape plans, but if she had to choose between the possibility of a broken limb and certain death, Gemma would jump.

Reaching in her dress, Gemma unearthed the fork and knife she was given with her supper—a tasty stew. King Torgen likely didn't know about the utensils, or that she had been fed, but Gemma internally thanked whatever kind soul ordered it as she tried prying at the two boards expertly nailed over the open window.

When the board bent Gemma's fork instead of being wedged from the window, Gemma changed tactics and tried sawing through the material with the blunt knife.

Gemma had to press hard to make the knife even scratch the surface, but after a few minutes of sawing, there were a few specks of wood shavings. Encouraged, Gemma pushed down harder and kept sawing. The motion made her arm ache, and eventually scream in pain, so after a few minutes more, she switched hands. Gemma was at it for an hour when both her arms were numb and heavy. She stopped sawing and let her arms drop while she inspected her work.

There was barely a gouge in the wood.

Gemma was no carpenter, but she knew it would take her days, not hours, to hack her way through the boards and to freedom.

The panic and desolation Gemma was keeping under tight control threatened to overwhelm her.

It was over. She was going to die.

When King Torgen returned in the morning, he was going to have her beheaded.

"No!" Gemma said, pounding a fist on the wall. "No," she repeated. Tears stung her eyes, but she glared at the board. "I can't give up," she said, stiffening her resolution before she started sawing at the board again.

Some of her tears escaped her eyes and rolled down her face. Gemma refused to acknowledge them and tried tugging on the board.

When a teardrop fell from her face and splashed on the windowsill, the door clanked and was thrown open with a mighty crash. Footfalls walked into the room, and the door slammed shut.

Gemma whirled around, hiding her knife behind her back.

A strange man stood at the door. He was tall, but his shoulder width put him more on the slender side. He wore black cape with the hood pulled up, blocking most of his face except for his fine mouth.

His cloak was unlike any style Gemma had seen before. It latched on the right side of his neck with a large sapphire pin. Part of the cape was

pushed behind his right shoulder, keeping his right arm free and mobile. The rest of the cape covered his front. If his mouth wasn't so pleasant looking, Gemma would have wondered if he was death coming prematurely for her.

As it was, he was likely a less-than-savory servant of King Torgen. "I told My Lord if I was seen while working, the flax would not turn to gold," Gemma said, wary of the man but hopeful the encounter could be used to her advantage.

The stranger tilted his head. "What?" he said in a voice that was musical and fresh like a newly melted snow stream.

"Didn't King Torgen send you here to check on my progress?"

"No, not at all. You are Gemma Kielland, correct?"

"Yes," Gemma said.

"Then I am here to help you."

Gemma stared at the stranger with her icy eyes. "How?"

The stranger's fine lips parted in a smile to reveal perfect, white teeth. "I am here to spin the flax into gold."

"Are you?" Gemma said with no conviction.

"Yes. I overheard your plight and decided a rescue was in order."

Gemma exhaled and rubbed her eyes. "Please go away. I haven't the time to deal with a madman," she said, her forehead furrowed.

The stranger chuckled and pushed the front flap of his cloak over his left shoulder, revealing strange clothes underneath. He wore a black shirt that contained none of the fanciful puffs that were all the rage in Loire. It was tailored, almost like the Erlauf military uniforms Lady Linnea day-dreamed of. Over the black shirt, he wore a vest that was the same shade as his sapphire cloak pin and bulky with pockets. The look was finished with black breeches and black boots that were so well polished, Gemma suspected she could see her reflection in them if she drew close enough.

"You are an amusing one," the stranger said as he sat in the chair and arranged the flax fibers, pulling some away from the bundle tied to the distaff. He wet his hand in the water pot to moisten the fibers, and set about rolling the fibers and mashing them with the end of the flax thread already wound around the spindle. He pressed a foot pedal to crank the wheel—which made the spindle rotate and the thread wind. As he worked, he spoke under his breath, almost like he was conversing with the flax fibers and spinning wheel.

Gemma raised her eyebrows at the man, but he was absorbed with his work. Nonchalantly, Gemma strolled around the room and tried tugging on the door. It was locked. Those outside must have locked the door when the stranger entered.

Gemma returned to her window and reluctantly turned her back to the spinning stranger—listening intently lest he lose his mind all together—and returned to sawing at one of the boards barring the window, hoping the clanks and whirls of the spinning wheel would cover up the noise of Gemma sawing.

Eventually, Gemma forgot about the intruder and furrowed her forehead as she pressed against the board with all her might.

"You're trying to escape? Smart girl, smarter than your father," the man said in his fresh, musical voice.

Gemma jumped and almost tossed her knife into the air. When she had a good grip on the knife again, she folded her arms across her chest and stared at the stranger.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you," the stranger said as he looked at the scratched up board with a critical eye.

Gemma could still hear the spinning wheel whirling. She risked a glance at the spinning wheel, and then she *did* drop her knife.

The spinning wheel was spinning, and flax fibers pulling away from distaff unaided, rolling and curling itself around the spindle. The spindle was not wound with coarse flax thread…but something shiny.

Gemma leaned back on her heels when she realized the material curling around the spindle was not thread, but finely spun metal. Gold.

Gemma studied the gold thread and considered the possibilities. Was she dreaming?

No, my arm aches too much for that.

Perhaps she had cracked with grief, and the man was a figment of her imagination.

Gemma slid her eyes sideways and poked at the stranger's cloak with a finger. The cloak, to her surprise, was made of soft, slippery cloth the likes of which Gemma had never seen.

No, he has too much presence to be a hallucination.

Then the last option—the option which Gemma privately thought made the least sense—was that the stranger was some sort of do-good-er magician or enchanter.

“I apologize for my thoughtless words, sir,” Gemma said. “In my defense, I did not know your station.”

“My station?”

“You are an enchanter.”

“Skies and clouds, *NO*.”

“Then you are a mage.”

The man tilted his head to the left and then to the right, his lips similarly slanted as he thought. “Yes,” he said.

Gemma bowed her head in reverence. An enchanter was the highest rank a human gifted with magic could achieve. They were to be treated with as much reverence as a foreign dignitary. Mages were ranked well below enchanters, but they were still to be treated with respect and honor. “Why are you doing this, sir?”

“Let’s just say I have an obligation to help those in need,” the mage said.

“Thank you,” Gemma said.

“There is something I need in return, though,” the mage said.

Gemma took a step backwards. “Oh?”

The mage’s fine lips twisted in a scowl. “It’s not what you think. This part is always so awkward…” he sighed and tried again. “My magic is about trade. I need something as a payment. It does not have to be equal in worth; I just need something even remotely valuable. Like your gold necklace,” the mage said.

Gemma touched the necklace. It was a string of gold so thin, fishing wire had more width to it. But the necklace was a gift from Grandmother Guri on Gemma’s fifteenth birthday, and it was the only thing of worth Gemma owned.

Gemma glanced at the mage. The innocent set of his mouth said he didn’t know what he was asking for, and, Gemma supposed, a gold necklace was a small price to pay for her life—should King Torgen actually set her free, as unlikely as Gemma thought that to be.

“You are a mage who can spin flax into gold, and you want a *gold necklace*?” Gemma asked, unclasping the necklace from her neck.

The mage’s smile was sheepish. “I apologize. I know it must seem odd to you, but it’s the price of my magic,” he said.

Gemma raised her eyebrows but said nothing. It wouldn’t be wise to pose impertinent questions to a mage who was in the process of saving her.

So, she handed the necklace over, placing it in the mage's warm palm.

"Thank you," the mage said.

"No, sir. It is I who should be thanking you," Gemma said.

"You aren't quite what I pictured," the mage said, pushing his hand into the depths of his cloak to stow Gemma's necklace.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I thought, based on your parents, that perhaps you would be less confident. To be perfectly honest, I expected you would be a sobbing mess by the time I arrived."

Gemma gave the mage a look of displeasure. "I see."

"Ahh, and now you are offended. Why?"

"If I compared you to a street-corner charlatan magician, how would you feel?"

The mage laughed, and Gemma doubted her earlier judgment. Perhaps she really was hallucinating after all. Gemma had never before met a mage, but she was under the impression that they were stuffy and didn't laugh often.

"You are such fun. I'm glad I heard about you," the mage said.

"Do you often run around, saving damsels in distress?" Gemma asked, turning to face the scratched up board.

"You find that unlikely?"

"I thought it was a knight's job to rescue fair maidens," Gemma said, sawing at the board again.

"Maybe, but we mages can't let them hog all the glory," the mage said with a handsome smile.

Gemma's fingers and arms twisted with pain as she stubbornly sawed away.

"You don't have to keep at it. The King will let you go after he sees this," the mage said, walking across the room to add flax fibers to the distaff.

Gemma glanced over her shoulder. "Perhaps," she said.

"Only perhaps?"

"King Torgen is not the type to let someone off so easily."

"Spinning flax into gold is easy?"

"You're not from Verglas," Gemma said.

"What makes you say that?" the mage asked, joining Gemma at the window. He watched, leaning against the wall as Gemma sawed.

“You underestimate King Torgen’s cruelty,” Gemma said, bracing against the board so she could press down harder.

“Do I?”

“Last fall, he nearly killed Princess Elise of Arcainia. She did nothing wrong—she was hiding in Verglas while performing a difficult task to rescue her cursed foster-brothers. He would have burned her at the stake if the curse hadn’t broken *while* he had her set on fire.”

“Why do you put up with it?”

“Pardon? I don’t understand what you mean,” Gemma said, glancing at the mage. She stopped sawing long enough to adjust her grip on her dinner knife before she went back to it.

“Why do the citizens of Verglas put up with it? Why don’t you overthrow him?”

“As much as we fear him, he does have the blood of the Snow Queen’s family in his veins,” Gemma grunted. “And as much as we hate him, we have absolute loyalty to the Snow Queen.”

“Even though she’s been deceased for centuries?”

“Even then.”

The mage folded his arms across his chest. “Centuries later, and Verglas is still unwavering. I wonder if she spelled the people in addition to the land.”

“It helps that it’s mostly the nobles and those of us foolish enough to live in Ostfold who bear the brunt of King Torgen’s temper,” Gemma continued. “And the country already has enough trouble. It hasn’t been officially stated, but everyone knows Arcainia all but owns Verglas. We have a mountain of debt to them.”

“Is that so,” the mage said.

Gemma was still sawing at the board when she saw white dance on the horizon. A geyser of snow shot up from the ground into the air. Ice formed behind it, stretching as tall as a small mountain. The display was far away, but it was impossible to miss as the moonlight danced on the snow and ice, making it shine like lightning.

The tension faded from Gemma as she watched the display.

“What?” the mage said, leaning so he could see outside. He looked for barely a moment before he slid back against the wall.

“It’s the Snow Queen’s magic,” Gemma said.

“You can’t know that.”

“Every citizen of Verglas knows her magic like we know the faces of our mothers,” Gemma said, tilting her head as she watched the light reflect off the ice.

“You’re thinking something,” the mage said.

Gemma hesitated. “Yes.”

“What?”

“Why would the Snow Queen’s magic activate?”

“I would assume it means an evil magic wielder is trying to force his way past the Verglas borders,” the mage said. “That is what activates her residual magic, after all.”

“Of course—but *why*?” Gemma repeated. “The world knows about the Snow Queen. What dark magician could possibly be desperate enough to try regardless?”

The mage was silent.

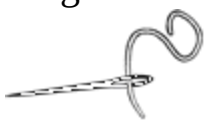
Gemma was quiet as well as she watched the snow fall. The sprouted ice disintegrated, falling from view.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” the mage said, pushing away from the wall. He retreated to the spinning wheel to check on the gold thread and the flax fibers. “It’s almost a joke,” he added.

“What?” Gemma asked as she adjusted the fold of blue cloth tied around her forehead.

“The Snow Queen’s magic is still strong enough to keep magic users with evil intensions out of her country, but it is the offspring of her family that rules with horror,” the mage said.

Gemma knew of no safe reply to the mage’s dangerous statement, so she tucked her chin and kept sawing.



After the midnight hour, Gemma gave up sawing and sank to the ground.

“Tired?” the mage asked.

“Perhaps.”

“You could sleep.”

“Exhaustion does not necessarily equate with sleepiness, Sir Mage,” Gemma said, running a hand through her wavy hair.

The mage tipped his head like a dog. “What do you mean?”

“It means I don’t think I could sleep if I wanted to. Death threats and King Torgen have that sort of effect on us normal citizens,” Gemma dryly said.

The mage smiled widely. “I see. I hadn’t thought about it like that. You mentioned before that you haven’t much hope King Torgen will release you.”

“Even if he does, he knows my name. He will remember the result forever. I will have to leave Ostfold immediately,” Gemma said pulling her legs to her chest to conserve heat.

“Is that so bad?”

“I would leave behind the only friendships I’ve ever made,” Gemma said, thinking of Grandmother Guri and Lady Linnea as she traced a hem of her brown and white uniform with her finger. “And I don’t think my survivability rate is favorable. I could perhaps find employment somewhere in Verglas, but King Torgen would surely hire the assassin’s guild to track me down. Outside of Verglas, I am more likely to survive, but who would want a seamstress from Verglas? We are the backwoods of the fashion world,” Gemma said.

“I don’t think you have ever strung so many words together before,” the mage said.

Gemma cracked a wry smile.

The mage sat down, resembling a tent with his swirling cloak. “I recall hearing you made dresses. You work for a lady, I believe?”

“Lady Linnea, daughter of Lord and Lady Lovland.”

“And they are nice?”

Gemma shifted so her head was able to rest against the back wall as she remembered watching Lord Lovland slink to the back of the throne room while King Torgen sentenced her. “Lady Linnea is a good person.”

The mage whistled. “High praise coming from a girl as reluctant as you.”

Gemma’s lips curled into the faintest hint of a smile. “Lady Linnea deserves it. She is unusual, but lovely.”

“I’m sure, to win over your loyalty. It’s probably easier to move a castle than you,” the mage said.

“I am practical, not stone-hearted,” Gemma said.

“No. You’re guarded,” the mage corrected.

Gemma shrugged.

“Right. Well if you’re going to stay awake, we may as well play a word game.”

“A word game?”

“Yes. I choose an object that is visible in this room. You ask me ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Based on my response, you make guesses about what the object is. I will pick an item first, and once you correctly guess it, it will be your turn to pick an item. Do you understand?”

Gemma glanced at the spinning wheel. “Is it gold?”

“You don’t start by directly guessing the item; you ask questions about it! And no, it’s not gold.”

“Hm. Is it the spinning wheel?”

“Why do I suspect you are being deliberately obtuse?”

“Fine, Sir Mage. Is it brown?”

“No.”

Prince Toril pounded on his father’s door the moment the sun peeked over the horizon. The mountains that stood guard at the castle’s back cast purple shadows across the land as Prince Toril hollered, “Father, I know you are awake.”

“What do you want? I thought you were off sighing over your lost princess?” King Torgen said, throwing open the door to his room.

Prince Toril was disappointed to see his father already wore a mad smile in spite of the early hour. Occasionally, if he caught him while he was still half asleep, King Torgen was more amiable.

Or perhaps he’s just less bitter, Prince Toril thought. As little as he liked to admit it, his father was growing crueler as the seasons passed. While he never had to fear for his own life, he knew the people were uneasy—even before Elsa—no—Elise was almost burned at the stake.

“You have a peasant girl imprisoned,” Prince Toril said.

King Torgen rolled his eyes and sighed in disgust. “Fell for another pretty face, did you? I should have beaten your gullibility from you as a child,” he said.

“I haven’t fallen for anyone,” Prince Toril said. “But you have to let this girl go.”

“Why?” King Torgen demanded. He started walking down the hallway. Prince Toril followed him, keeping pace.

“She hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“She wasted my time—which is more valuable than the blood that pumps in her veins.”

“Her *father* wasted your time,” Prince Toril said.

King Torgen stopped to stare at Prince Toril. “You are well informed of the matter.”

“I am,” Prince Toril said.

King Torgen looked down the hallway.

“It isn’t because I’m in love with the girl,” Prince Toril was quick to say.

“So you still love the mute swan girl, then? It’s a pity you’re so stupidly loyal.”

Prince Toril winced. “You must let the girl go, Father.”

Prince Toril ducked just in time to avoid King Torgen backhanding him.

“Listen closely, *son*,” King Torgen spat. “I must do *nothing*. I am *King*, and it isn’t until I die that you will rule. As long as I breathe, I reign. You would do well to remember that.”

Prince Toril was frozen by the mad, frenzied look in his father’s eyes. It wasn’t until King Torgen had walked twenty paces before Prince Toril was able to break out of his paralysis and follow.

“You are right. You are the King, Father,” Prince Toril said. “But it is your position only because you were granted it. You have an oath to uphold; we are to protect the weak, not behead them,” Prince Toril said, passing a line of guards.

King Torgen narrowed his eyes at Prince Toril. “You seem set on this girl.”

“I am set on freeing her, yes.”

King Torgen stopped outside a barred door. “Fine,” he said, sticking the key in the lock and twisting it.

“She will be free to go—even without spinning the flax into gold?” Prince Toril eagerly asked as guards removed the bar from the door.

“The peasant girl can—,” King Torgen went silent when the door opened.

“She can?” Prince Toril prompted. When his father did not respond, Prince Toril peered over his shoulder.

A rather normal-looking girl with brown hair and large eyes was standing in the middle of a barren room. Next to her was a spinning wheel, upon which there was a spindle of thread that glittered and twinkled like gold.

In that moment, Prince Toril knew the girl was doomed. He would never be able to save her from his Father’s clutches now.

Chapter 5

Gemma had dosed off for a few minutes when the horizon was pink with the promise of the sun. While she was sleeping, the mage must have slipped out. When she opened her eyes he was gone, although the gold thread was still there, wound around a spindle.

Gemma's body creaked and ached as she pushed herself off the ground—a most uncomfortable sleeping position—and approached the spinning wheel.

She held her breath, releasing it only when she reached out to touch the metallic thread. It was real, and it was most assuredly gold—or at least close enough that no one would know the difference.

"Not a hallucination then," Gemma said, turning to the window to greet the sun with a tame smile. Her future was still dark, but she would survive the day, which was more than she hoped for. With extra time, she could gather better escape tools.

Gemma was crouched in front of the spinning wheel, eyeing it with escape plans in mind, when she heard voices in the hallway. The door thudded and clanked as it was unlocked and unbarred. Gemma had just enough time to hide her bent fork and dull knife in her skirts before the door opened.

King Torgen stood in the doorway. His bloodshot eyes were immediately drawn to the gold thread.

"She can?" someone said out in the hallway. A handsome young man Gemma recognized as Prince Toril peered over his father's shoulder. The prince was…horrified. He looked from the gold to his father, dismay twisting his face.

"Gemma Kielland. Well done," King Torgen said, a delighted smile crawling across his face as he stormed into the room.

Gemma nervously backed up until she hit the wall before she stooped in a curtsey.

"You have indeed managed to spin flax into gold," King Torgen said, caressing the costly thread. "Just as I asked."

Gemma curtsied again rather than risk speaking.

"You will do it again."

“What, My Lord?” Gemma said. She wasn’t surprised but fear and disappointment still shot through her like an arrow.

“Guards, take her back to the dungeons. We will begin preparations for her next task,” King Torgen said, smiling cruelly at Gemma.

“Yes, My Lord,” the guards standing outside the room murmured. They organized themselves around Gemma and escorted her out of the room and down the hallway.

She was surprised when the guard captain fell in step with her.

“I won’t ask how you did it,” he said, staring straight ahead. “But I pray, miss, that you can do it again.”

“We shall see,” Gemma grimly said. “Prince Toril looked… displeased,” she said as they turned a corner and headed down the wretched spiral staircase that would take them to the dungeons.

“Yah. He managed to nearly talk King Torgen into releasing you.”

Gemma stopped walking. “He what?”

“Prince Toril was pushing for your release. He almost had it, too, until King Torgen saw the gold.”

Gemma pinched her eyes shut. She would have been free? If the mage hadn’t done this impossible task, she would be free to go.

“…Miss?” the captain said.

Or would she? The King was stubborn. It was likely he would come after her again as soon as Prince Toril’s back was turned.

I can still survive this. The mage really did save me, Gemma decided.

“You can’t do it a second time, can you?” the captain said.

Gemma squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “No,” she said. “But we’ll see who’s crowned the victor.”

“Pardon?”

“It is nothing, sir,” Gemma said, walking again. She was quiet until they reached the dungeons.

“We can move you to a more comfortable cell. The first one has a straw pallet. Take her there,” the captain told his men.

Realizing Lady Linnea would have a harder time finding her if she moved cells, Gemma was quick to say, “Please, I would prefer to return to my original cell. If you don’t mind, sir,” she said.

“Are you certain? You would be more comfortable,” the captain said.

“I’m positive, but thank you.”

The captain shrugged and nodded to his men, who escorted Gemma farther down the cell block.

"Why did you let the…stranger into my room last night?" Gemma asked when they stopped outside her cell.

"What?"

"Didn't you allow a visitor inside?" Gemma asked.

"Miss, if you go missing, my life and the lives of my men are forfeit. I pity you, but neither I nor my men would allow someone in your room while you were spinning. Did something happen?"

"No, I apologize. It must have been a dream," Gemma said.

"Of course," the captain said. He opened the dungeon door and bowed his head when Gemma slipped inside. "Someone will bring you breakfast shortly," he said.

"Thank you."

The captain nodded and closed the dungeon door with a clank.

Gemma shivered at the scratch marks and blood splattering the back of the dungeon door. She picked up her stool and put it under the window before climbing it. She stood on her tip-toes to peer outside.

Lady Linnea was not waiting—which didn't surprise Gemma. It was still early; Lady Linnea had most likely just finished her secret morning sword practice.

Gemma sat down on the stool and picked up the outer layer of her gown—which was a plain brown color—and ripped off a small piece of her linen kirtle. She tied the little strip in a bow around one of the bars in case Lady Linnea could not remember which cell she was in.

Gemma strained to get closer to the window to breath in the fresh air, her stomach rolling from the prevalent, coppery smell of blood that coated the dungeons. She glanced at the blanket and the soldier's cloak left on the ground from the previous day before she hopped off the stool.

I should rest. Even if I don't want to.

She tucked the blanket around herself after she sat down in a corner. She closed her eyes, trying to come up with an escape plan.

Lady Linnea paced back and forth. She had heard—thanks to a fist full of copper coins presented to a servant—that Gemma survived the night

with no threat of beheading. The servant insisted it was because Gemma successfully spun flax into gold, but that was *impossible*.

“Gemma is not the goose that laid a gold egg. She’s an excellent seamstress, but she hasn’t any magic!” Lady Linnea said, addressing Lake Sno. “Prince Toril must have gotten through to his father. That is the only reasonable explanation.”

Lady Linnea rounded the bend so she could peek past the trees and peer at the Verglas palace. No one was in sight.

“Will he take all day to arrive?” Lady Linnea groaned. Her message to Prince Toril asked him to meet her at the shores of Lake Sno *immediately*. Evidently the dim-wit did not share Lady Linnea’s sense of urgency.

“The lovesick fool is probably off sighing over flowers and a reflecting pool,” Lady Linnea sourly said, her expression pinched. “Perhaps I should see if I can speak to Gemma in the dungeons…”

“Lady Linnea!”

Prince Toril, riding a beautiful stallion, broke through the line of trees at the border of the forest.

“Prince Toril,” Lady Linnea said, treating the prince to a delicate and elegant curtsy before she smiled at him. “Isn’t it great news? I must give you a million thanks,” she asked. The smile fell from her lips when Prince Toril rode closer and Lady Linnea was able to read his stormy expression. “What is it?”

“Your maid—,”

“She’s my seamstress.”

“Fine. Your seamstress has not been released, nor was she spared because of my efforts.”

“Then how?”

Prince Toril sighed, his bangs falling over his eyes like a horse’s unruly forelock. “She spun flax into gold.”

“Impossible,” Lady Linnea said.

“Impossible or not, she did it. I saw it with my own eyes. All the flax fibers were gone, and instead, there was a spindle of gold thread,” Prince Toril said, dismounting.

“Then it was a trick of some sort.”

“It was not. Father had the goldsmiths inspect the thread immediately. It’s real gold.”

“But how? Gemma doesn’t have any magic. I *know* she doesn’t! If she had an ability like that, she would have used it before now to make her dresses even more exquisite! She has too much pride as a seamstress not to.”

“Does she have a patron? Someone who could hire a man to climb the castle walls and deliver gold thread to her?”

“It is a clever idea, but no. She is employed solely by my family. She has parents, but they are penniless. Perhaps Papa and Mama did it. How much thread was there?” Lady Linnea asked, offering her hand—palm up—to Toril’s stallion.

“A good amount on a spool this big,” Toril said, gesturing with his hands.

Lady Linnea bit her lip. “Then it was not my parents. They like Gemma well enough, but Papa wouldn’t give up that much gold for a seamstress.”

“And *you* didn’t do it?” Prince Toril pointedly asked.

Lady Linnea frowned at Prince Toril. “If I thought up that smart of a plan, I wouldn’t have bothered to ask you for help in the first place. It’s a shame I *didn’t* think of it.”

Prince Toril also frowned at the casual, verbal backhand. “It was *not* a smart plan. I nearly talked my father into letting her go. And then he saw the gold.”

“He won’t release her?”

“Not now. Even though it is obvious someone besides Gemma made the gold, he’s not going to give her up. He is too greedy.”

Lady Linnea wilted. “I hadn’t thought of that possibility. So she’s still captive.”

“Yes. And Father intends to make her spin again.”

“*Tonight*?”

“Probably. The materials need to be gathered I suppose, but after—,”

“That’s it!” Lady Linnea said.

“What?”

“We can delay the spinning if we buy up all the flax in Ostfold!”

Prince Toril was almost pulled off his feet when his stallion tossed his head. “Do you have any idea how much that will *cost*?”

“Who cares? Gemma just spun your father gold thread. You can afford it. Now are you going to help me save my seamstress or not?” Lady Linnea

asked, planting her fists on her hips.

“Buying the flax won’t save her.”

Lady Linnea closed her eyes and knitted her hands together to keep from reaching out and pulling on Prince Toril’s long bangs in impatience. “It won’t,” she agreed, her voice tight as she tried to practice patience. “But it will buy Gemma some extra time until I can think of a proper escape strategy.”

“Oh,” Prince Toril said.

Lady Linnea waited several moments for a more eloquent response. None were forthcoming. “So?”

“Yes?”

“Will you buy the flax?”

Prince Toril patted his stallion’s glossy neck. “Very well,” he said. “I hope this servant of yours is worth it.”

“Gemma is priceless,” Lady Linnea said. “Now get to the markets. You have to buy the flax before your father gives the orders!”

“Ahh, yes,” Toril said. He gripped the stallion’s reins before vaulting back into the saddle. “I will send word to you about the flax.”

“Thank you. I will speak with Gemma and see if she will tell me how she received the gold,” Lady Linnea said.

“You what? You cannot. She is in the dungeons.”

“I already know that,” Lady Linnea said, rolling her eyes. “She was wretched hard to find.”

“You went to the *dungeons*?”

“Heavens no! Even I am not that daring. No, I found her by the prison windows.”

“I see.”

“Good. Now get buying!” Lady Linnea said, making a shooing motion at the prince. “Prince Toril,” she called after the prince turned his stallion in the direction of the forest. “Thank you.”

Prince Toril bowed at the waist. “I am happy to help,” he said before he rode off.

“Even if he isn’t the brightest, I like him more when he is invested, not moping,” Lady Linnea decided as she bustled off in the direction of the palace.

“…and that is our plan,” Lady Linnea said, smiling brightly.

“I see,” Gemma said.

“What do you think?” Lady Linnea asked.

“It sounds expensive,” Gemma honestly responded.

“Well, maybe. We’ll see. That reminds me, how on earth did you get gold thread?” Lady Linnea asked, peering down into the depths of Gemma’s cell.

“A mage broke into the room and spun it for me,” Gemma said.

“If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to make up a story about it,” Lady Linnea said.

“It’s not a story.”

Linnea rolled her eyes. “Regardless, do you think you can pull it off again?”

Gemma tilted her head and studied the far wall. What was the likelihood that the mage would magic his way through the castle to come to her rescue a second time? “I don’t think so.”

“That’s too bad. We’ll just have to get you out before the King imprisons you in another room with flax. Ah, that reminds me! Here,” Lady Linnea said. She disappeared for a moment. When she swerved back into view, she carried an axe, which she struggled to lower through the grille of the window.

The fat, wedge-shaped head caught on the bars and would not push through.

Lady Linnea grunted, her eyes shut tightly as she strained to hold the tool. “Do you have it?”

“It is stuck on the bars.”

“What? Please tell me you are jesting.”

“I don’t often jest, My Lady.”

Lady Linnea sat on the grate and tried maneuvering the axe through the slender gap between the bars with no luck.

“I don’t think it’s going to fit,” Gemma said.

“It has to,” Lady Linnea grunted as she heaved all of her weight onto the axe’s wooden handle. “I’ve failed you too many times. It’s unacceptable.”

“Someone is going to hear you,” Gemma said, staring at the stuck axe head that clanked against the window grille.

Lady Linnea gave up and tossed the axe aside, her shoulders drooping. “I’m sorry, Gemma. I’m useless, aren’t I?”

“You are not,” Gemma said, giving Lady Linnea a rare smile of affection.

“I am, too. I keep trying, but I fail! *Trying* alone isn’t going to save you,” Lady Linnea said, brushing dirt off her dress. “I’ll bring something later today—a slender dagger without a hilt, perhaps.

“You think you will be able to slip away from your home again?”

“Yes. Mama and Papa think I’m despondent and locked up in my room since you were taken away. Although I better go. They’ll be knocking on my door soon for lunch,” Lady Linnea said before she ducked from view. Gemma heard a clank as the noble lady tried hefting the axe over the wall that separated Gemma’s cell from the palace grounds.

“My Lady,” Gemma said.

Lady Linnea reappeared. “Yes?”

“Thank you for the help,” Gemma said.

Lady Linnea smiled. “Of course. You are important to me, Gemma,” she said before she threw herself at the wall and started climbing. “I’ll see you this afternoon!” she said, hefting herself over the wall and disappearing all together.

Gemma was sitting on her thick blanket when the cell door clanked open.

“I’ve got your early dinner here,” a guard carrying a tray said. He pushed up the visor of his helm several times before he gave up and tossed the protective head-covering outside the dungeon. Gemma recognized the man as the kind guard who had delivered dinner the night before, as well as her breakfast that morning.

“Thank you,” Gemma said, sitting up straight.

“No need for thanks,” the guard said, briskly setting the tray on Gemma’s stool. He glanced at Gemma and made a sweep of the surroundings before he shook his head.

“Do you know when I am to be taken tonight?” Gemma asked.

The guard scratched his thinning hair. “You’re not. The spinning won’t be ready for another day. There seems to be a shortage of flax fibers.”

Gemma stared at the man. *Lady Linnea’s plan was actually working?!*

“I see. Thank you,” Gemma repeated.

The man shook his head. “I will return for your dishes,” he said, stooping to pick up his helm before he left Gemma’s cell, locking it behind him.

Gemma looked over the plates and cutlery piled on the tray. She nibbled on the food—a delicious roasted duck—but mostly pushed it around. Her stomach gurgled with nerves as she tested the knife for sharpness and compared it to the dull, warped one she had smuggled into her spinning room.

As she ate, Gemma swapped out the knives and thought about the fixed patterns of her prison life—mainly the movement of her guards.

Chapter 6

Gemma didn't move the following morning when the kind guard opened the door to her cell to deliver her breakfast tray.

The soldier pushed up his visor before, as customary, he removed his helm altogether. He entered the cell and looked around for the stool before realizing Gemma, huddled in the corner, was sitting on it, her eyes closed and, to all appearances, sleeping.

"Poor thing," the guard said before he turned his back to Gemma and set the tray down. He crouched down to fix some of the items on the tray, and Gemma smashed him in the back of the head with the stool.

He toppled over with a groan, stunned long enough for Gemma to unbuckle his belt and slide the keys off.

She ran out of the cell and shut the door as the guard started to recover.

"What are you doing? Stop! Help!" he yelled, but his shouts were muffled behind the thick dungeon walls.

Gemma fumbled with the three keys on the ring before she found the right one and locked it just as the soldier slammed into the door on the other side.

Gemma dropped the keys and ran through the surprisingly empty dungeon. She sprinted up the stairs just as voices emerged from the far end of the chamber.

When she reached the top stair—sweaty and out of breath—Gemma paused long enough to look up and down the hallway. She spied a laundress pushing a cart of laundry. When the woman paused to enter a side room to gather more laundry, Gemma grabbed a huge pile of dirtied linens. She held the laundry at chest height so it mounded over her like a cloth mountain, hiding her face.

Still carrying the laundry, Gemma prowled down the hallway, looking for a way out of the palace. Her hands trembled when a group of three chattering maids glided down the hallway. Gemma's heart throbbed in her chest, but none of the servants called out to her, or even seemed to notice her as she walked.

Gemma slipped around a corner and leaned against a wall. *Enough*, she thought. *I have to be calm.* Gemma tilted her head and listened. The palace

was mostly silent. Servants talked in hushed tones and did their work quickly and efficiently. No one had raised a cry yet. Perhaps no one even knew she had escaped.

Still listening, Gemma started walking again. This time, she followed her ears, moving in the direction of servants' chatter.

She made it to the kitchens with no trouble. Rather than plunge through the warm room in a bundle of laundry, Gemma followed an outer wall that led away from the kitchens. Eventually, it opened up into a courtyard.

Gemma heaved the laundry higher up and walked across the courtyard. She couldn't believe it when she passed the palace walls and entered the gardens. She made it to the shores of Lake Sno without being detected. Gemma skirted up to the line of trees that crowded the lakeshore. Then, she dropped the laundry and ran, following the edge of the forest.

Eventually, she came upon a little shack. Gemma took a risk and peeped inside. The shack was empty and buried under dust. It obviously hadn't been used in some time. There were white swan feathers that dotted the furniture, and a small bundle of what looked like dried nettles.

Gemma ransacked the place, looking for blankets, provisions, anything she could take. It wasn't safe to return to Ostfold. She was better off hiding in the forest and at the base of the mountains. In a few weeks, maybe she could venture into the outskirts of Ostfold to ask Lady Linnea for help.

Gemma would have to abandon her relationship with Grandmother Guri. It was far too dangerous to risk seeing the older woman. And as sad as it made Gemma to lose her, she wouldn't allow anyone to be killed because of her. Gemma, in the middle of swinging open a cupboard door, paused. *The captain said his life and the life of his men would be forfeit if I escaped…No. I cannot afford to think of them. I must hide,* she decided, glancing inside the cupboard and moving on.

She climbed a ladder to find a loft filled with straw and peppered with swan feathers. Her conscience railed at her as she climbed down, and she sagged against the ladder when she stepped off the bottom rung. *They were kind to me, and surely they have families and loved ones who will miss them.*

Gemma leaned her cheek against the dirty ladder. "What does it matter? I must think of myself. No one would think of saving *my* life—not

my drunkard father, nor my mother who hasn't the strength for it. No one would…except for Lady Linnea."

Gemma closed her icy eyes and balled her hands into a fist. "By the Snow Queen," she cursed before releasing a great sigh. "Lady Linnea is right. I am foolish," she said before exiting the shack. She retreated back up the shoreline, picking up the abandoned laundry when she found it. She dawdled on the lakeshore for a few moments (enjoying the sunlight on her skin in spite of the blustery wind) before walking back through the royal gardens and into the palace.

She set the stolen laundry down in an empty hallway and wandered deeper into the palace. It took her a while to find the dungeon stairs, and when she happened upon them, she stared for a few minutes before she took in gulps of fresh air and set her shoulders.

Gemma fixed her face into an expression of strength, then plunged down the stairway. Her heart beat heavier with each step she took, and every instinct screamed at her to run. But she followed the stairs all the way to the dungeon. When she reached the bottom stair, she leaned forward to look down the aisle formed the boundaries of the cell blocks. The door to her cell was open, but there were no guards to be seen. Obviously, someone had freed the man who delivered Gemma's breakfast.

Gemma tried to walk the remaining distance to her cell, but her legs stiffened and froze. So she plopped down on the lowest stair, hunched over her knees in a miserable ball, and waited to be discovered. Her shoulders shook in a moment of despair. Panic clawed at her, and her emotions threatened to overtake her. *It isn't fair. I never asked for this, I*—Gemma impatiently crushed the thought and threw her arms over her legs, resting her head on her arms. She didn't look up when several sets of heavy footfalls raced up the aisle.

"Any news from the palace guards?" a male from one end of the dungeon called.

"None. She did not go out the front gates—or if she did it was before we notified them," a different man at the opposite end shouted.

"Contact the dog master," the first man said.

"I already have; he asked for her blanket," the second soldier said as he ran past Gemma and the staircase. "If we're lucky it will have her scent —," the soldier cut himself off and backed up to stand in front of Gemma and stare down at her.

Gemma lifted her head up. “Good morning,” she said, impatiently wiping at her eyes that were, irritatingly enough, burning with tears.

The soldier pinched his eyes shut and rubbed them before staring at her.

“Foss,” the guard from the opposite end called. “*Foss*! What is wrong with you, man?” he said, his voice growing louder as he drew closer. “Are you—,” the guard—or the captain, as Gemma recognized him once she could see his face—cut himself off when he joined “Foss” at the dungeon staircase to gawk at Gemma.

Gemma finished wiping her eyes and stared back at the pair. “I would walk myself back my cell, but my legs have given out at the moment,” she said.

Her words kicked Foss into moving. “We should tell the others—no! First we need to put her in her cell! Where are the keys—,” he quieted when the captain placed a meaty hand on his shoulder.

“Why?” the captain asked.

Gemma met the captain’s gaze with her sharp, intense eyes. “Why what?” she prompted.

“Why did you come back? There is a very good chance we wouldn’t have found you. You were free.”

Gemma rolled her shoulders back. “Does it matter?”

“Yes,” the captain said.

Gemma stared at Foss and the captain. Foss shifted and squirmed, but the captain was an unmovable mountain. “Because you and your men don’t deserve to die. Is that an acceptable answer?”

The captain didn’t reply. Instead, he let go of Foss and reached out to help Gemma stand. He held her arm while walking her back to her cell—Gemma wasn’t sure if it was because he was supporting her or keeping her from running away.

When they reached Gemma’s cell, Gemma slipped inside. She picked up her stool and set it in a corner. “Is he alright?” Gemma asked, gesturing to her untouched breakfast tray.

“He is uninjured,” the captain said, reaching for the cell door. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I would let you go if…I’m sorry.”

Gemma sat on her stool. “There’s nothing to apologize for. You are not the one who has imprisoned me,” she said.

The captain was silent as he studied Gemma for a few moments longer before he shut the cell door with an ominous clank. Gemma flinched, but held herself together.

The brief escape made the dungeon feel even colder and darker. The stench made her stomach roll, and the silence was suffocating.

"If I got out once, I can do it again. I will just have to make certain I do it so no one can be blamed," she vowed.

"Gemma. Gemma, I am a genius, and you must tell me that," Lady Linnea called, almost falling over the wall above Gemma's cell. "Buying up the flax has worked marvelously—even if that idiot Prince Toril almost *ruined* it all by having the flax sent to the palace. A chicken has more sense than him. He is—what's wrong?" Lady Linnea said when she realized Gemma wasn't responding.

"Hm? Nothing. Sorry, I was sleeping," Gemma lied, unfolding from the corner into which she was pressed. She moved the stool so it was beneath the window and stood on it, looking straight up at her friend.

"Really?" Lady Linnea said doubtfully. "You look pretty dreadful."

"How did you hide the purchased flax from King Torgen?" Gemma asked. (It was easier to distract Lady Linnea than to lie outright to her. The beautiful lady was observant, and it was likely that she would haul off and hit Gemma if she knew Gemma had the chance to escape and chose to returned to her cell.)

"Oh! It was brilliant. I ordered straw to be bought, and we spread it on top of the cart of flax fibers!" Lady Linnea beamed. "Prince Toril got the stable servants to agree not to tell King Torgen," she grudgingly added.

"I see," Gemma said.

"I brought you something," Lady Linnea said, reaching for something out of sight. "Here," she said, passing a small hand hatchet through the window grate. "It's not very sharp, but it was the only one I found that I thought could fit through the bars," Lady Linnea said.

"Thank you," Gemma said. She smiled as she ran a finger along the axe-head. "This will be useful."

"Also, I thought you might have to bribe someone at some point, so take this," Lady Linnea said, shoving her fingers through the grille to offer Gemma a plain, gold ring.

“I cannot take your jewelry, My Lady,” Gemma said.

“Pft, this old thing? I received it at party in Loire. Means nothing to me—it’s too small for my fingers anyway. Take it, I’ll never wear it,” Lady Linnea said, wriggling her fingers to wave the ring in Gemma’s face.

Gemma stared at Lady Linnea for a few moments before reluctantly taking the ring. “Thank you, My Lady,” she said before Lady Linnea pulled her hand back through the bars.

“You’re welcome. Oh! One more thing. An old lady told me to give you this,” Lady Linnea said, stuffing a small pouch through the bars.

“An old woman?” Gemma asked after the pouch nearly fell on her face. She caught the pouch and opened it. Inside was a number of sewing needles carefully jabbed into a piece of fleece.

“She approached me when I was walking in our garden with Mama and called me a blood thirsty barbarian! Thankfully, Mama was talking with Jentine and didn’t hear.”

“Ah, it was Grandmother Guri,” Gemma said, brushing the needles with her forefinger.

“Grandmother Guri? The woman who taught you to sew?”

“Yes.”

Lady Linnea made a tisking noise. “It’s a shame she didn’t tell me as much. I would love to converse with such an interesting woman.”

“She is unusual in that way,” Gemma said, studying the needles.

“So why did she give you…sewing needles?” Lady Linnea asked, pressing her face against the ceiling-window grate so she could have a better look.

“I don’t know. Did she say anything?”

“No. Perhaps she meant for you to use them as lock picks?”

Gemma slid the needles back in the pouch. “I don’t think they’re they right shape, My Lady.”

“You can always try. Anyway, I’ve got to go. Mama is getting suspicious. She tried forcing me to take lessons again today, but Papa said I didn’t have to. He feels bad about leaving you—as he should,” Lady Linnea snorted like an antsy horse.

“Thank you for the hatchet and ring, and for delivering the needles,” Gemma said.

“Of course. I will see you soon. Be well!” Lady Linnea said before she darted from Gemma’s sight.

Gemma sat in the bit of late afternoon sunlight that peeked into her cell and studied her newly acquired items.

She ran a finger over the dulled hatchet edge and walked the perimeter of her cell. “It’s all stone, so unless I could chop through the iron bars—which I can’t—I can’t burrow out. And even if I did, the soldiers would be blamed for my escape. I will have to escape when I’m supposed to be spinning. Perhaps I can convince King Torgen I must be unguarded,” Gemma murmured.

She sighed and lifted the hatchet up again to study it. “Where on earth am I going to hide this?”

Minutes stretched into hours as Gemma experimented with various locations of securing the hatchet in her clothes so it would neither fall out nor cut her.

It wasn’t until the sky was purple-blue with the beginning of night that Gemma realized no one had stopped by. Not that she was expecting anyone besides Lady Linnea, but the guards hadn’t dropped off lunch or appeared to take her breakfast tray.

I don’t blame them. They must be leery of me, Gemma thought as she rested her back against a grungy wall and closed her eyes.

“You lie and say you can spin flax into gold, and you return to the dungeons after a successful escape attempt. I am beginning to think you might have a death wish.”

Gemma lurched forward in surprise at the familiar, melodious male voice.

It was the mage.

Gemma stood, careful not to disrupt the various escape items she had strapped to her body, and hopped on the stool to look out the ceiling-window.

The mage sat on the edge of the grille with enough ease to make Lady Linnea jealous. He still wore his unusual, black cloak, but today he had on tan, cotton pants that puffed a little at the knee but were tucked into his boots, a blue sash with incredible beadwork as a belt, and black cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. A blue dragon was embroidered on his shirt, and if Gemma looked at it out of the corner of her eye it seemed almost like the dragon moved.

Why does he dress so oddly? He must be ancient and is dressing in styles from the distant past, Gemma decided, taking in the mage’s clothes.

He lounged on the cold ground as if he were seated on pillows with his elbows propped on the grate and his legs carelessly crossed. His face was covered by his cloak, but his fine chin and lips were pointed down at Gemma.

“I very much wish to live,” Gemma firmly said.

“Truly? You need to be more convincing, in that case,” the mage said.

“If I did not lie about my abilities, King Torgen would have killed my father in addition to me. Although I cannot abide the man, my mother feels *something* for him, and it would be cruel to leave her alone in this world.”

“And your escape this afternoon?”

“The guards in charge of me would have been slaughtered.”

“You would sacrifice yourself for the men holding you captive?”

“I would sacrifice myself to spare the men who have shown me kindness in spite of the danger they face. They have families, children, and wives who would miss them. I am but one person,” Gemma said, getting a crick in her neck from looking straight up. “It is not that I wish for death or think I am worth less as much as it is that I choose to not see them die for my sake.”

“You are noble.”

“If you say so,” Gemma said, hopping off the stool.

“No, I don’t think you understand me, Gemma Kielland. You are *noble*,” the mage said.

Gemma leaned against a gritty, damp wall. “I fear you have been deceived. I am not noble. I have often been told I am a jaded, cynical being who speaks with the intent to maim.”

The mage chuckled. “You mistake aristocracy for nobility. By noble, I mean you have an excellent moral character.”

Gemma felt like she had no response to such a compliment.

“It is a rare quality,” the mage added, his voice wistful.

Gemma pushed off the wall and raised her icy gray-blue eyes to look at the mage. “Rare? I should think you often rub elbows with people of excellent moral character,” she said.

“Why would you say that?” the mage asked, his fine lips curling with the question.

“You are a magic user—,”

“Craftmage.”

“Sure. Magic users—and mages—are some of the most outstanding figures in the world,” Gemma said.

“Maybe we once were,” the mage said, sighing with elegance. “But now we have so many rules and regulations we must follow.”

“Aren’t they noble rules? You said you had an obligation to help those in need.”

“I did, and I do,” the mage agreed. He tilted his head to look up at the sky, treating Gemma to a quick few of his rather fine nose. “But it’s not because of any regulation. When I made the rank of craftmage, a very dear friend spoke to me about the responsibility of using magic. She insisted that whenever possible, it was my duty to help the weak. I swore I would do so.”

Gemma pinched her lips together.

The mage exhaled. “And I’ve upset you. What is it?”

“I take exception to being labeled weak.”

The mage laughed outright. “As you should,” he said. “If I have learned anything about your character, it is that you are a strong woman.”

“Hm,” Gemma said.

“Which brings us back to you. Why did you so nobly return? Why did you lie in the first place?” the mage asked, tucking one knee to his chest.

Gemma shrugged. “What could I gain by thinking only of myself?”

“Your life?” the mage said.

Gemma pinched her lips together.

“And now I’ve offended you again.”

“No. I merely no longer wish to dwell on my actions. Good evening, Sir Mage,” Gemma said, walking towards a corner of her cell.

“Ah, wait, you hasty thing,” the mage called.

“Yes?”

“Tomorrow, you will be summoned by King Torgen to another room to spin flax into gold.”

“I suppose so.”

The mage nodded. “I will help you complete the task.”

“Why?” Gemma asked.

“My obligation to aid those in need…but also because you deserve a little magic.”

“Wouldn’t it be better—easier even—to free me from my cell?”

“Perhaps, but I am hopeful we can find a way for you to return to your normal life. Breaking you out would shatter that chance,” the mage said. “Do you understand?”

Gemma shrugged. “It seems I am a bother.”

“I don’t mind. I will be stranded in Verglas for a time anyway,” the mage said, looking away again.

Gemma and the mage were silent for a few minutes before the mage spoke. “You don’t talk a lot, do you?”

“Why should I speak if I have nothing of worth to say?”

“Noble, strong, and practical. If we keep this up, in several nights, I will be able to fully report on your character,” the mage said.

“Hm,” Gemma said, conveying disinterest as she returned to leaning against the cell wall.

The mage rustled around on the grate for a moment before sliding his hand through an opening. “Here,” he said, holding out a chunk of cheese and an apple.

Gemma looked from the offered snack up to the mage. “I have plenty to eat myself,” he said.

“Thank you,” Gemma said. She was careful not to touch his hand when she took the food—not out of fear as much as respect.

“Now that you’ve been fed and reassured, are you in the mood for a game?”

“The question game?”

“Yes.”

Gemma held back a sigh. “Is it a mouse?”

“That is *not* how the game works.”

“Yes, Sir Mage.”

“Since you are so against guessing, I will take a turn. Do you have something in your mind?”

“I suppose so,” Gemma reluctantly said.

“Excellent, is it a material?”

“No.”

“Is it a food item, then?”

“No.”

The stupid game went on for at least an hour. As little as Gemma liked the game, she had to admit it kept her mind off her pitiful circumstances,

and by the time the mage crowned her as the champion of the night, Gemma’s heart was lighter, and the dungeon was not so terribly bleak.

Chapter 7

At sunset the following day, Gemma stood in front of her cell door, her arms folded across her chest, her feet firmly planted. Her stomach growled so loudly it was painful. She hadn't had anything to eat besides the apple and cheese from the mage almost a full day before.

Gemma stood as still as a statue and was not disappointed. Within minutes, the door to her cell clanked and swung open.

The captain from the previous day, the guard called Foss, and four other guards stood on the other side, braced as if Gemma were a wild animal about to attack.

Gemma raised an eyebrow at their stance and wordlessly joined them in the aisle. The soldiers crowded around her, making it difficult to move. Gemma was surprised they didn't put shackles on her or tie her arms behind her back.

The escort to the room she was to spin in was silent, awkward, and uncomfortable. The guards startled whenever she moved—Foss almost yelled when she raised a hand to adjust her hair-band.

After climbing two different sets of stairs and winding down several hallways, Gemma and her escort popped out in a narrow corridor where King Torgen, Prince Toril, and a band of guards were waiting for them.

"Gemma Kielland, your time has come," King Torgen said, indicating to the doorway in front of him. "The conditions are the same as before. Spin all the flax into gold by dawn, or I will have you beheaded."

Gemma glanced through the open doorway and, with disappointment, noted that it was not the same room as the previous time. Even worse, there was a great deal more flax. There was so much, in fact, that it covered the room like a fibrous carpet.

"Very well, but I have a new condition as well, My Lord," Gemma said.

"What?" King Torgen said, his face going from feverishly happy to angry.

Behind him, Prince Toril made a gesture to stop.

"I will spin this flax, but it will make more noise than my previous time. I cannot have any guards on duty—for if they hear my work, the flax

will fail to turn into gold," Gemma said.

The guards surrounding Gemma did not turn to gape at her—as Gemma was sure they longed to—but one of them shifted, and two of the guards who were holding spears tightened their grips so the wooden poles of their weapons creaked.

They knew what she was doing—or trying to do.

"I think not, Gemma Kielland," King Torgen said, his bloodshot eyes narrowed.

"Then you won't see a speck of gold," Gemma said, her voice flat as she stared the King down.

Nobody spoke.

King Torgen and Gemma stared at each other. Gemma held his feverish glare. She knew if she looked away, he would tear into her.

"Father, you should give her a fair chance," Prince Toril said. "If she, er, cannot complete the task it will hardly be her fault."

King Torgen sneered. "Fine. The guards will *stay* on duty, but they will be stationed two hallways away."

With this pronouncement, King Torgen walked away, four guards trailing behind him.

Prince Toril shuddered. When his father drew out of sight, he whispered, "That was dangerous. I can see why Lady Linnea thinks so highly of you."

"Forgive me, My Lord," Gemma said.

"No, I know what you were trying to do. It was an honorable idea, but he's not desperate enough to give you whatever you demand. Yet," the prince said as he looked at Gemma with a pinched expression.

"Thank you, My Lord," Gemma said when she realized he expected some sort of reply.

"I'm sorry I can't help you more. I'm working to keep flax fibers out of Ostfold for now. I hope that is useful. Will you be alright tonight?"

Thinking back to her time spent with the mage, Gemma cocked her head. "I think so."

Prince Toril's shoulders slumped with relief. "Great—I'll tell Lady Linnea. Until tomorrow morning, then. I wish you all the luck in the world," Prince Toril said before stepping away.

Gemma was herded into her new spinning room—which was considerably larger than the previous room.

“Sorry, miss,” a guard said before he swung the door shut. It clanked when it was locked, and thudded when the bar was slid into place.

“There goes that idea,” Gemma sighed. She glanced at a small, round table that was loaded with food. There was pickled fish, boiled potatoes, baked apples, cheese, fat slices of sour dough bread that was so fresh it was still warm, and a small block of butter.

Gemma’s stomach growled at the wonderful smells, but she forced herself to walk the perimeter of the room. The walls were wooden, but when she knocked, it seemed that there was some kind of stone behind the panels.

The window, Gemma eagerly saw, was again barred with wooden boards, but this room was located on the top floor. Unless she could fashion a *very* long ladder, Gemma would die climbing out.

“It doesn’t help anyway. I can’t leave, or the soldiers will be killed,” Gemma said. Not knowing what else to do, she wandered over to the table and started to eat.

After she finished her third potato, she turned to the mound of frayed blankets piled next to the table. As Gemma chewed on a chunk of baked apple, she unfolded a blanket, inspecting it with a critical eye.

“Might help,” she said.

An hour later, when the mage opened and shut the door with a deafening clank—that Gemma didn’t understand how the soldiers could miss—Gemma greeted him.

“Hello, Sir Mage,” she said before stuffing a piece of buttered sourdough bread in her mouth.

“Working on your next escape plan?” the mage asked in his throaty voice.

“Yep,” Gemma said around the bread as she continued braiding the strips of old blankets she had shredded.

“Rethinking your sacrifice?” the mage asked, walking over to the spinning wheel.

“Nope,” Gemma said. She tossed the sturdy rope/braid and blanket pieces aside and began gathering up flax fibers. “I’m just preparing.”

“I see,” the mage said, wetting his fingers and pulling flax fibers away from the already prepared distaff, maneuvering them so they circled the spindle.

“Will you have enough time tonight to spin all of this?” Gemma asked, dropping an armload of the fibers by the spinning machine.

“Yes. The machine will merely have to spin faster. If it appears that I am running out of time, I can always set up my spinning wheel,” the mage said.

“You have a spinning wheel?” Gemma asked, looking at his cloak with new appreciation.

“Yes. I carry a number of tool kits, spinning wheels, saws, everything,” the mage said. “I need them to work my craft-magic.”

“So you make magical items?” Gemma asked.

The mage shrugged. “Yes. But it takes quite a bit of time to make things from scratch. My more valuable skills lie in the ability to bestow magic upon regular items after they have already been made. It’s not often I get to make something truly magical, though.”

“Why not?”

“In order to work my magic, the item must be high quality.”

“I would think that would mean it would be quite easy if you visited a King or Queen,” Gemma said, dropping another bundle of fibers by the spinning wheel.

“No, I don’t mean expensive. The high quality has nothing to do with the base materials,” the mage said as he added fibers to the distaff when the spinning wheel starting whirling on its own as his magic activated. “The item needs to be well made by a true craftsmen. These days, people are more concerned with getting the newest styles as quickly as possible—which means the items appear to be beautiful but often the crafters have taken shortcuts to churn them out,” the mage said.

“So you can only make something magic if it’s well made?”

“No, I can still enchant cheap knock-offs,” the mage admitted. “But they don’t hold on to the spells very long, and they won’t stand up for repeated use—the spells can only be used once.”

Gemma lingered at the table to eat a pickled fish. “I find it surprising that all goods are growing less…perfect. Some countries are known for their craft exports.”

“I suppose you are right,” the mage said. “It’s still reasonably easy to find high quality furniture and food items. Jewelry can be iffy; it depends on the jeweler who made it. The same goes for weapons. The true problem is clothing. Clothing—anything made of cloth really—is *terrible*. Even

robes made for a king will rarely hold more than two or three spells or charms. Unfortunately, cloth is usually what most people *want* enchanted," the mage said. In spite of his glorious voice, he sounded like a teacher scolding a miscreant pupil.

"Why?" Gemma asked.

"It's easier to carry around than furniture; it can hold a larger variety of spells than weapons; it will take stronger spells than the ones that can be spelled on food, and it is less expensive than jewelry," the mage said. His face was pointed in the direction of the spinning wheel. After watching it spin out gold thread for a few moments, he nodded.

"But enough of my tribulations," the mage said, his lips forming a handsome smile. "I want to hear about you."

Gemma picked up the last flax fibers and dumped them by the spinning wheel. "Why?" she said with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

"Because you interest me," the mage said, sitting down by the table of food. "So, from whom did you inherit your nobility? Certainly not your father."

"You've met him then?" Gemma asked. She hesitated and stood in front of the table, wondering if it would be terribly disrespectful if she sat and ate with the mage. Probably.

"One could say that," the mage, said, pointing to the cushion next to him.

"Ah, my sympathies," Gemma said, ignoring the gesture and folding her legs to sit across from him.

"Your mother, then?" the mage asked, mashing a potato with the only knife that came with the food.

"Nope," Gemma said. She reached under her dress and slid her pilfered dinner knife out—the mage choked on his potato at this particular reveal—and used it to butter another piece of bread. "Do you want some bread?" Gemma asked when the mage finished coughing.

"Where were you storing that?" the mage asked. He tilted his chin up and leaned forward, as if he were peering over the table at Gemma's skirt.

"Not telling. This *nobility* you keep harping about is probably something I learned from Grandmother Guri."

"Paternal or maternal grandmother?"

"Neither. I'm not related to her."

"I see."

“I spent a lot of time with her when I was a child. She taught me how to sew, which is how I became a seamstress,” Gemma said.

“You think she might have passed her character on to you?” the mage asked with a teasing smile.

Gemma shrugged. “People say we say similar things.”

“What do you mean?”

“We are borderline offensive.”

The mage turned to hide his struggle to keep from laughing.

“I’m trying to be truthful, Sir Mage,” Gemma said.

“I can tell,” the mage said. “Perhaps it is something nobody can take credit for, and it is something that uniquely belongs to you.”

“Sure.”

“You still don’t understand what I mean, do you?”

“Not at all,” Gemma said, finishing her bread. She dusted off her hands and picked up her blanket rope, fidgeting her way back into it.

“I supposed if you reveled in your superiority, that would cancel the nobility of your character,” the mage said. “What *are* you doing?”

“Making a rope.”

“For?”

“The future. You never know when you will need rope,” Gemma said.

“I can make you rope if you want some that badly, you know.”

“After what you just explained about cheap fabrics? I’ll pass.”

“I didn’t mean *I* make things with shotty craftsmanship; I meant the general population. I’m sure you don’t either, of course,” the mage was swift to add.

“Uh-huh.”

The mage laughed. “You are quite a bit of fun.”

Gemma raised her eyebrows. “I believe this is the first time anyone has thought so.”

The mage grabbed the last slice of sourdough bread and, in one elegant motion, rocked to his feet. “Then everyone you know is blind,” he said, checking the tension of the spinning thread.

Gemma smiled for the merest moment. She glanced up at the mage to make sure he hadn’t noticed—he was still busy tending to the spinning machine—before she bent over her work with determination.

It was just after midnight when Gemma hacked the last wooden bar covering the window apart. Her back and arms ached, and she was sweaty and growing chilled in the cool, fall air, but the window was wide open. and the crisp air smelled like freedom.

“Well done,” the mage said. “But I fail to see what the open window will accomplish as you seem most determined to save your guards.”

Gemma looked down at her hatchet and shrugged. “I felt like hacking at something,” she said.

“That’s a useful way to channel your aggression,” the mage said, crossing the room. He leaned out of the open window and inspected the outside walls. He momentarily turned back in the direction of the spinning wheel before climbing onto the window sill with great ease.

With elegance that was unnatural—considering how high up they were—the mage started to stand, molding his body against the castle wall when he passed the boundaries of the window frame. He jumped, and the buckles on his black boots glittered before he disappeared from sight, climbing upwards.

Gemma leaned out of the window and watched the mage pull himself up over the edge of the roof, resting on the base ledge. The patch of roof spiked above him like an icicle, and snowflakes the size of Gemma’s head formed the lattice work around the triangle.

“Care to join me?” the mage asked.

Gemma pointedly looked down, where large torches posted in the courtyard were barely pinpricks of light.

The mage laughed. “I won’t let you fall,” he said, scooting on the ledge so he could offer his hand.

Gemma grumbled under her breath about nutty mages, but the lure of the cool, fresh air and the light of brilliant moon soon had her heaving her body onto the window sill.

“There are so many carvings, it’s actually quite easy,” the mage said, gesturing to the caribou carving next to the window.

“Right. Easy,” Gemma grunted as she planted a foot on the hooves of the caribou’s back legs and strained to grab his rearing front legs. Gemma grumbled more about crazy mages when her grip slid and her stomach rolled—making her regret the last few pieces of bread she had eaten—before she climbed higher.

When Gemma clambered onto the caribou's head, the mage grabbed her by the back of her dress and helped haul her onto the ledge.

"It's less windy here," the mage said, motioning for Gemma to scoot further into the triangular shape. "Which is lucky, because I'm no weather mage," he said, offering Gemma a grin.

Gemma had nothing to say—the intimidating climb up to the ledge and her knowledge of everything she owed the mage kept her from speaking the insults.

Instead, Gemma admired the beauty that lay outside the castle. The night sky was a deep purple with a screen of stars twinkling like diamonds sewn into lace. Fresler's Helm—one of the tallest and surely the most famous mountains in the range that loomed around the royal palace like the train of a dress—glowed in the moonlight. Occasionally, long strands of emerald green and shadowed snow blue light swirled from the mountain and added extra color to the sky.

The air chilled Gemma, freezing her cheeks and nose, but it smelled fresh, with hints of leaves and smoky fires and—just the barest trace of what would soon come—snow.

It felt amazing to be outside again. Her escape attempt had awakened Gemma's longing to be *out*. Out of the castle, out of the black walls of the dungeon. Sitting on the ledge in the fresh air soothed her.

"It's beautiful," Gemma said after several minutes.

"It is," the mage agreed, rustling around in his cloak. "Verglas is savage and wild, but also unbelievably beautiful. Here, take this. It will keep you warm," he said, removing something from his cloak. He breathed on it before holding it out to Gemma.

In his hands was a ruby. It was the deep red of blood, cut as thinly as a knife blade, and fashioned in the shape of a flame.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching out to take it. Gemma jumped in surprise when she touched the ruby and felt heat flow into her finger tips and up her arm. She withdrew her hand and eyed the elaborately cut gem.

"A heat charm. One of the more rare variety as it's attached to jewelry," the mage said.

Gemma slowly reached out and took the charm, her shoulders relaxing from the hunch she had pulled into when the heat spread through her body. "Is this an example of a charm that could be put in cloth—or clothes?"

The mage nodded. “My cloak has the same effect as the ruby. Most gems and precious metals can hold a large amount of magic. They are merely much harder to procure. That heat charm would go for the same price as, say, hmm, a matched team of four horses with good bloodlines and excellent confirmation.”

“*What*?” Gemma said, her eyes bulging.

The mage shrugged. “It’s why royals can afford such charms for themselves and but cannot afford to outfit their armies. Which is just as well.”

“Is it really *that hard* to find good quality cloth goods?” Gemma asked.

The mage gave Gemma a quirk of a smile. “You have no idea. I’ve wanted a carpet for *ages*—there’s an old spell I found that will make it fly—but I haven’t found a good enough carpet yet for a price I can pay,” the mage sighed.

As Gemma watched him, she slowly changed her mind about the mage. Originally, she thought he had to a century old—even if his lips and chin were fine and young-looking. Magic preserved its wielders longer than the human lifespan, anyway. But the more the mage talked, Gemma saw the impatience, the language, and the gestures of a younger man. Was he, perhaps, possibly *half* a century old?

“What’s wrong?” the mage asked when he caught Gemma staring.

“Nothing,” Gemma said, looking back at the sky. She cupped her hands around the heat charm, relaxing as its warmth worked its way all the way down to her toes.

“I was going to ask you this earlier, but I hope you have something stuffed in your dress as payment?” the mage asked.

I will need to thank Lady Linnea. I had forgotten about the payment, Gemma thought. “Yes, but I’m afraid it will hardly be any better than the previous payment,” she said. She clenched the ruby in one hand and slipped the gold ring out from under her hair-band—which had held it strapped to her head.

Gemma held out the plain gold ring, and the mage took it.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I still cannot see the logic in giving a *mage* who can spin flax into gold a gold ring,” Gemma said.

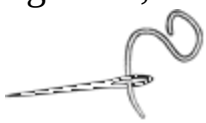
“Magic is often hard to understand,” the mage said.

Gemma shrugged and held the heat charm closer to her chest, almost hitting her head on a decorative snowflake carving.

“In a few minutes, I will have to go indoors again. I trust my spinning wheel to go for hours, but I don’t know about this one the palace is lending us,” the mage said.

Gemma nodded. “Thank you for the heat charm, and for helping me up here.”

“It was my pleasure,” the mage said, his voice soft with sincerity.



The sky was pink with the promise of the sun as Gemma sat at the table and ate the last baked apple. It was cold, but still tasty with the zing of cinnamon.

“Finished—and just in time,” the mage said, winding up the last length of gold thread.

“I imagine you must be very popular with royalty thanks to this trick?” Gemma asked.

“No—not many know I can do it. Those that do know belong to the magic community, and they hardly care. Gold is used like a cheap spice by those in positions of power,” the mage snorted. “Here,” he said, handing Gemma a wad of fibers.

When the pink light of dawn hit the fibers and they glowed, Gemma saw that although they hadn’t been spun into thread, the fibers were gold. “No,” Gemma said, passing the fibers back.

The mage smiled—amused by Gemma’s refusal. “Why not?” he said dropping the wad of fibers on her lap.

“I’m a seamstress. I can’t do anything with gold,” Gemma said, picking the fibers up and holding them out.

The mage shook his head. “It’s too late to add them to the thread now. Take them. I would rather you have them than that murderous king of yours.”

“I can’t,” Gemma said.

“Why not?”

“This has to be at least equal the cost of the gold ring I gave you,” Gemma said.

“So? How is that a problem?”

“It just is,” Gemma said, sliding away from the small table. “Here, take it.”

“No,” the mage laughed.

“You are insufferable,” Gemma glowered.

The mage grinned and leaned closer. “And you are quite fetching,” he said before playfully tapping Gemma’s nose.

If Gemma had been any less prone to emotional outbursts, her jaw would have dropped at the harmless flirtation. Instead she stared straight ahead, slightly dumbfounded and as enthusiastic as a block of ice while the mage withdrew.

“I had best be off. It would be most embarrassing if the King opened the door and found me here with you. I will drop by your cell later today to hear whatever good news has been bestowed upon you,” the mage said, striding for the door.

Gemma uncomfortably cleared her throat.

“Yes?” the mage said, turning to face her.

Gemma ran a hand through her wavy, brown hair. “I, I don’t think I’ve properly thanked you yet…for everything.”

“Everything?”

“The gold thread, the bad bargains, the food…” Gemma said.

“Of course,” the mage said, blessing Gemma with a soft smile.

“And I’m afraid I have done you a great discourtesy, but I am afraid I might also offend you, so if you would prefer not to answer, please don’t.”

“Yes?”

“What is your name?”

The mage’s soft smile cracked into a grin so pleased and handsome Gemma had to briefly shield her eyes from the sight. “You can call me Stil,” he said.

“Then, craftmage Stil,” Gemma said. “Thank you, for saving my life,” she said, curtseying.

Stil returned the gesture with a deep bow. “It has been my pleasure.”

Gemma could only nod and self-consciously fix her hair band.

Stil left, and Gemma had just enough time to secure the wad of gold flax fibers in the sleeve of her dress before the door clanked open.

King Torgen brutishly pushed his way in, almost knocking over one of his guards to do so. He claimed the spindle of gold thread and held it above his head so it glowed in the morning light.

“Gemma Kielland,” he said when he was finished gazing at it. “You are a treasure.”

Although the words sounded nice, the look on the king’s face made Gemma shift uncomfortably. His eyes were no longer lit by mild greed, but by a ravenous appetite. His smile was more of a snarl. He looked as if he wanted to eat Gemma—or at least roast her alive.

“Take her back to her cell!” King Torgen snapped at the guards before he returned his attention to the gold thread.

“Come, Miss,” the captain of Gemma’s guards said, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her out of the room as quickly as possible. She barely had time to bow to Prince Toril, who was kicking up his heels in the hallway, before her guards hurried her away at a trot. They slowed only when they reached the stairs.

“What was that for?” Gemma asked.

“It is not wise to place you near the King when he is in such a mood,” a guard said.

Gemma glanced at her escort. “What mood would that be?”

“Madness,” another guard grimly said.

They were silent until they reached the dungeons. Gemma thought they would lock her in her cell without anything further to say, so she was surprised when the guards stopped some feet away from her cell.

“Yes?” she said when she realized they were all staring at her.

“We never thanked you, Miss Kielland, for coming back,” the captain said, snapping a salute at Gemma—his men mimicked him.

“Oh,” Gemma said, awkwardly clasping her hands together. “You’re welcome.”

“Is there anything at all we can do to repay you for your kindness?” the captain—and apparently the spokesperson said.

“No,” Gemma said, somewhat bemusedly. All the strange and uneven deals she had been involved in the past few days were increasing. She couldn’t give Stil anything of worth; the guards couldn’t do anything to help her, and Gemma’s only useful skill was sewing. “Unless,” Gemma said, brushing her skirt to feel the pack of sewing needles from Grandmother Guri bump her skin. “There is something,” she said, pulling the puff of gold fibers out of her sleeve. “If I give you this, could you have someone purchase fabric for me?”

The captain took the golden flax with wide eyes. “This is from—,” he started before breaking off and shaking his head.

“We could melt it down,” the guard Gemma recognized as Foss said. “I have a brother-in-law who is a goldsmith. He’ll keep his mouth shut so the King doesn’t hear about it.”

“We could trade for the fabric if it wasn’t so recognizable,” another soldier said.

“What did you have in mind?” the captain asked.

Gemma’s forehead furrowed as fabrics and patterns flipped through her mind. “I will need silver thread—black thread too. A lot of it. And I think…black wool and dark blue silk.”

Chapter 8

Lady Linnea snored and rolled over in her sleep. It was dawn. Usually she was up by now, practicing sword techniques with the fireplace poker. But last night she stayed awake much longer than she meant to, fretting about Gemma.

How was Gemma getting the gold thread? Could she really get it a second time? How could she be smuggled out? These thoughts tormented Lady Linnea into the wee hours of the morning.

So it was to Lady Linnea's great chagrin that she didn't wake up until something tapped the glass pane of her window.

Lady Linnea, about as picturesque as a ruined soufflé, picked her head off her goose-feather pillow. "What?" she said, smacking her lips several times. When she noticed the dark shape crouched by her window, she had a dagger in her hands in an instant.

The figure tapped on the window before pressing his face against the frosted pane. "Lady Linnea, it's me," Prince Toril said. "Could you let me in—YIKES," he yelped when he nearly fell off the roof on which he was crouched.

Lady Linnea threw on a robe and stalked across the cold room. "I never think you can get more idiotic, but somehow *every time* I see you, you manage it," she said, opening the window and grabbing the struggling prince by his cloak, dragging him into her room.

"You are absolutely mad," Lady Linnea declared, shutting the window behind him. "First of all, you could break your skinny neck by climbing two stories in the frost and cold. Secondly, do you have any idea what will happen if our parents hear about this? Please try to use your head, however small it may be, and *think* for once."

"I did," Prince Toril said, picking himself up off the ground with an injured look. "I thought you would want to know what happened to that servant girl of yours. I can see now that I was wrong," he stiffly said.

Lady Linnea sighed, exhaling the fight and stiffness out of her body. "No, you are right. I apologize; I am very eager to hear about Gemma, and I am sorry for abusing you so. What happened?" Lady Linnea asked, clasping her hands together as she feared the worst.

“She did it again,” Prince Toril said.

“She *what*?”

“She spun all the flax into gold thread. I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it myself, but she did it,” Prince Toril said with a puppy smile.

Lady Linnea sat down hard in an armchair. “She did it,” she repeated.

“Do you know how she’s managing it?” Prince Toril asked.

“No,” Lady Linnea said, relief making her lightheaded. “I asked her about it—she said a mage broke into her room and did it for her.”

“That can’t be,” Prince Toril frowned. “There aren’t any mages in the area. At least, none have presented themselves at the palace—and they *always* do.”

Lady Linnea shrugged. “I don’t care how she does it as long as she is alive. This is marvelous!” Lady Linnea said, sagging in her chair.

“Not quite,” Prince Toril said.

“What do you mean?”

The prince shrugged uncomfortably. “My father.”

“What of him?”

Prince Toril shrugged. “I don’t think he’s ever going to release her.”

“He can’t keep her in the dungeons forever,” Lady Linnea said.

“No, but he will try to think of a reason to keep her chained to him so she will spin gold whenever he wants it,” Prince Toril said. “I believe we could potentially help her escape, but now—especially after the large amount of gold she spun last night—my father would create a bloodbath among his guards and hold them responsible for it.”

“Oh,” Lady Linnea said, drooping further.

“Furthermore, this maid—,”

“She’s my seamstress.”

“This seamstress of yours will never be safe in Verglas—not as long as Father is alive. If we manage to free her without getting all the guards killed, she will have to flee across the border.”

Lady Linnea bit her lip and looked west. “The Kozlovka border is closest to Ostfold.”

“It would be better if we sent her to Loire or, ideally, Arcainia. My father would never dare to reach for her there after last year’s episode with Princess Elise,” Prince Toril said.

Lady Linnea stared at Prince Toril, shocked by his moment of brilliance. “Yes,” she said before brightening again. “You could take her

and then go to romance that princess of yours."

"Maybe," Prince Toril slowly agreed. "But I think it would be best if I stayed behind to clean up the mess my father will make. Will you go?"

"No. My parents hardly let me out of the house. I could never talk them into allowing me to leave the country," Lady Linnea sighed. "But it makes no difference. I could send a servant with her, or Gemma will survive on her own for a time. She's a smart girl, and much more clever than I am," Lady Linnea said. "What?" she asked when she noticed the odd look Prince Toril gave her.

"I don't think I have ever heard a person say their servant is more clever than they are," Prince Toril said.

Lady Linnea shrugged. "Gemma is fiendishly smart. Although I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression! In a situation that requires weapons, I would perform far better than her," she said with a proud smile as she stood.

"I see," Prince Toril said.

Lady Linnea pulled her robe tighter around her waist when she heard someone rustling in the room next door. "You have to leave—someone will be by shortly to tend the fire."

"Ah, right! Of course," Prince Toril said, retreating to the windows. "Do we continue with your plan to purchase flax?"

"Yes," Lady Linnea said, glancing over her shoulder. "I mean to visit Gemma this afternoon. Will you be available after lunch?"

"Yes. I'll wait for you on the shores of Lake Sno?"

Lady Linnea nodded and flipped her tangled blonde hair over her shoulders. "Until then. Now get out!" she said.

"Yes, yes," Prince Toril said. He opened a window and slipped out. He climbed across the roof and down the side of the manor with surprising agility.

When he dropped to the frost-covered grass and raised a hand to wave to Lady Linnea, the young lady called, glancing around guiltily to watch for servants. "Prince Toril?"

"Yes?"

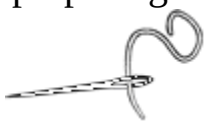
"Thank you."

"For buying the flax?"

"No, for coming," Lady Linnea said.

Prince Toril bowed. When he straightened, Lady Linnea heard a tap on the door. She waved to the prince before hastily shutting the window and pulling the drapes to cover it.

"Come in," she said, before preparing herself for the day.



"When Mama heard about the rumors, she called the steward, head maid, housekeeper, and chief footman and told them if she ever heard such silliness about you being spread through the house again, they should plan on seeking employment elsewhere. Of course *everyone* knows Malfrid is the one who started the rumors. I don't know why Mama has retained her thus far. She is as sour as a skunk," Lady Linnea said, her voice dripping with disgust.

Gemma finished sewing the seam that attached a piece of black wool to a liner of midnight-blue silk. "I'm happy to hear Lady Lovland defends me, even though I am no longer a Lovland employee," Gemma said, rolling the fabrics so the new piece was no longer inside-out but outside-out.

"What?" Lady Linnea yelped, banging her elbow on the grate of the ceiling-window. "What do you mean 'no longer a Lovland employee'?"

"Exactly what it sounds. I am not a Lovland employee. How can I be, locked up as I am?" Gemma said, her eyebrows furrowed as she shaped the fabric piece into a hood. "I hope it is deep enough. He does enjoy covering his face," she said, placing the hood on her head to be certain the rim fell low over her face—it did.

Lady Linnea didn't hear Gemma's mutters as she was too busy squawking. "But! You just—who cares if you are locked up!"

"I can hardly make dresses for you in this situation, My Lady."

Lady Linnea eyed Gemma like a curious songbird. "But you are making some sort of…thing right now. You could do the same for me!" the young lady said, puffing out her chest. She thought for a moment before adding, "Not that I expect you to. I imagine sewing for someone else is the last thing you wish to do right now. But, you can't just…What will I do without you?" Lady Linnea protested, peeking down through the window grille

"I wouldn't worry about it just yet, My Lady," Gemma said, setting the hood aside to eye the pieces she had already cut for the body of the cape.

The soldiers were quicker to retrieve the material than Gemma had hoped. She had placed her "order" the previous day, and they brought it to her when they delivered her dinner tray that same evening.

"What do you mean?" Lady Linnea asked.

"No one knows what is going to happen to me," Gemma grunted as she matched up pieces. "King Torgen might imprison me for life, or he might have me killed on a whim. My future is extremely unstable," Gemma said, sounding unbothered by her tumultuous life as she selected a piece of wool and silk. "This lining is going to take ages to sew."

"You will live," Lady Linnea sternly said, shaking a finger at Gemma. "And for now, Toril and I have bought every scrap of flax in the city. King Torgen is being forced to look outside Ostfold, so we have bought you at least a week, possibly longer."

"Oh? So it's just Toril now, is it?" Gemma asked, lifting an eyebrow as she threaded a needle.

"You are reading too deeply," Lady Linnea said, blushing a faint pink. "I could call him the Idiot, but that hardly seems respectful."

"I see," Gemma said.

"You don't sound convinced," Lady Linnea said.

"That would be because I am not."

"Gemma!" Lady Linnea scoffed and made snorting noises like an angry horse.

Gemma unwound black thread from the spool and started the first few stitches of the piece before she straightened it out and jabbed some of the extra sewing needles in strategic locations to keep the piece straight.

"I'm glad you seem to be doing well," Lady Linnea said when she was through being flustered. "I worried when you were first imprisoned. You had lost much of your spirit."

"Imminent death often does that to a person," Gemma said.

"I know *that*," Lady Linnea rolled her eyes. "What I meant is…you are you again. The fight is back in your words. I'm glad," Lady Linnea said.

Gemma stopped sewing long enough to peer up at Lady Linnea through the barred window and give the lady a reassuring smile. "Thank you," she said.

Thank you for caring.

Understanding what was unsaid, Lady Linnea ruffled her cloak and shifted her seat on the chilly grate. "Of course," she said. "You might also

note I’m valiantly not asking who the cloak is for,” Lady Linnea added.

“The mage,” Gemma said.

“I told you already that you don’t need to make up stories. No matter how you’re getting the gold, I would not be angry,” Lady Linnea said.

“Uh-huh,” Gemma said.

“I wouldn’t be mad even if I learned you had a beau here in the castle. Especially if he is slipping the gold to you,” Lady Linnea said. “Is it one of the guards?”

“Nobody is courting me, My Lady.”

“Right,” Lady Linnea said. She looked to Gemma’s project with undisguised curiosity before she sighed. “I need to go.”

“Do you have a meeting scheduled with Prince Toril, again?”

“No,” Lady Linnea said, wrinkling her nose at Gemma. “Worse: I have embroidery practice.”

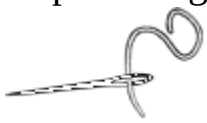
“Ah. Good luck.”

“Thank you. I shall need it,” Lady Linnea said.

“Take care, My Lady.”

“You too! Do not hesitate to tell me if you need anything,” Lady Linnea said before scrambling out of sight. “Goodbye!” she said, popping back into view as she climbed the wall like a deft squirrel.

Gemma shook her head and kept sewing.



Gemma was tying off her thread a day later when the door clanked open. “Yes?” Gemma said when she looked up and realized the guard—Foss—didn’t have any food with him.

Foss adjusted his helm. “The Captain said—if you like—Rudd and I are to take you outside for a walk.”

Gemma stared at the guard.

“He said you might appreciate the fresh air,” Foss added. “Would you like to?”

“Yes, please,” Gemma said, hastily standing. She folded the long pieces of the cape, stacked them in the corner of her cell, and grabbed her cloak before joining Foss at the door.

Foss backed up into the dungeon aisle, where another guard—Rudd assumedly—waited. “This way, Miss,” Rudd said, his voice a deep,

rumbling noise. He led the way to the dungeon stairs, and Foss brought up the rear behind Gemma.

"Where would you like to go, Miss?" Foss asked. "The kitchens? The library?"

"The gardens," Gemma said, throwing the cloak over her shoulders in preparation for the cool air.

Foss hesitated. "It's quite cold out," he said.

"I'll be fine," Gemma said. "And I promise I will not run."

"We know, Miss," Rudd rumbled.

Neither of the soldiers said anything more as they led Gemma through the twisting palace, popping out a small door that Gemma supposed—based on its close proximity to a weapon storage room—was a guard entrance and exit.

The fall air had cooled considerably. Gemma's dungeon window was sheltered, so the bitter wind that yanked at Gemma's cloak and clothes was a shock.

"Are you sure you want to be out here?" Foss shouted over the howling wind.

"Yes. Is there a more protected area?" Gemma asked.

"This way," Foss said, beckoning.

Gemma followed Foss and Rudd into a tiny, narrow courtyard nestled into the castle that still afforded a view of Lake Sno and, if one stuck their head out of the protected area, Ostfold.

"Thank you," Gemma said, pulling her borrowed cape closer, able to speak at a regular volume in chilly but sheltered courtyard.

Foss nodded in acknowledgment.

Gemma itched her nose as she looked out over the beautiful lake. Her expression thoughtful, she extended her finger and pointed past the lake, to the area where the mountains flattened into the Kozlovka border. "The first night I was ordered to spin, I saw some of the Snow Queen's magic activate there. Do you have any idea what it was?"

"Ah, yeah, that," Foss said. "The night watch saw it too. Some guards were dispatched in the morning to investigate it. They found—what was it, Rudd?"

"Hellhound," the second guard supplied.

"Yeah, hellhound tracks and horse hoof-prints," Foss said.

"A *hellhound*?" Gemma said.

“Yep. I haven’t heard of one coming so far north in ages,” Foss said. “Of course it will never get into Verglas,” he was quick to add.

“Why do you ask?” Rudd wanted to know.

“It just seemed…unusual,” Gemma said.

Foss squinted up at the cloudy sky. “Yeah,” he said. “Oh, the captain said we were to tell you that you can expect at least two weeks before the King will be ready for you to spin again.”

“Two weeks?” Gemma said.

“All the flax in the area has been bought up and shipped south. The King has to buy it in small loads—some of it isn’t even correctly prepared, yet,” Foss said.

“I see,” Gemma said.

“The King was purple with rage when the news was given to him,” Rudd said.

“Especially when he received a written offer from Princess Elise of Arcainia. Prince Falk has come up with a new type of flax, which she offered to sell a load of,” Foss said.

“He ripped that letter up and threw it in the fire,” Foss added.

Gemma grinned. “Thank you for the news,” she said, pushing her hair out of her face.

“Sure thing,” Foss said. He hesitated, and rested his hand on the pommel of the sword strapped to his waist.

Gemma slid her hands under the cape and waited for the soldier to build up his courage.

“If you don’t mind my asking…what are you making with that fabric?” Foss finally asked.

“A cape.”

“For?” This time it was Rudd who asked.

Gemma inhaled the frigid air, her shoulders bunching up before she exhaled and relaxed. “Someone to whom I owe a great debt.”

“I hear the guards are allowing you out for walks,” Stil said the following day. He sat on top of the ceiling-window grille, blocking some of the cold air.

“They call it ‘airing me out,’” Gemma said, holding the mage’s ruby heat charm in her hands.

“It is kind of them.”

“Yes,” Gemma agreed. “Do you recall the first night you helped me, and we saw some of the Snow Queen’s magic?”

“Yes.”

“I asked them about it. They found hellhound tracks right on the border.”

“Were there horse hoof-prints too?”

“…Yes,” Gemma was slow to respond. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Stil sighed, thumping his fist on his knee. “Did the guards bring you more blankets?” Stil asked, gesturing to the pile of wool and silk.

“No,” Gemma said. She refrained from offering a more detailed explanation.

Stil half smiled at the blatant cold-shoulder and pursued a different conversation topic. “How soon do you think the King will parade you out for more gold?”

“Two weeks or so,” Gemma said.

“More intelligence from the guards?”

“Yes.”

“I see. I am glad they have become closer allies since your return.”

“Yes,” Gemma said, glancing at the empty tray on which Rudd had served her dinner. She thought for a moment, “I apologize, did you want something to eat?”

“No, not at all. I already ate, and the hour is late,” Stil said.

Gemma rustled in her nest of blankets. “Thank you for coming,” she said, resting her clamped hands on her feet as the ruby charm pumped heat through her body.

“Of course. I enjoy our conversations. You are quite amusing, and no one else will play the guessing game with me,” Stil said.

Gemma arched an eyebrow at him.

Stil grinned unrepentantly.

Gemma shook her head.

“So, Miss Kielland, tell me: if you could have anything in the world, what would you want?” Stil asked.

Gemma leaned back against the dingy wall as she thought.

“Having trouble prioritizing?” Stil teased.

“No. There’s not much I want.”

“Jewels to wear, a home of your own, gold—none of that appeals to you?” Stil asked.

Gemma shrugged. “What good are jewels when the person I visit most often is Grandmother Guri? Her goat—Jo-Jo—would try to eat them. Gold is pretty but useless to a person of my station. You can’t eat it, nor can you sew with it.”

“A home, then?”

“They reek of work. I would rather spend my time sewing,” Gemma said.

“A sum of money?”

“Money brings out the worst in people,” Gemma said, thinking of the irresponsibility of her father.

“You might be the least greedy person on earth due to sheer practicality,” Stil said.

Gemma shrugged. “I know what I like. The rest is unnecessary.”

“So what would you like?” Stil asked.

Gemma scooted lower in her blanket pile. “To make clothes and travel. I want to see the fashions of Loire, Sole, Erlauf, and Ringsted. I would like to see the differences in clothing between the counties.”

“Ahh, you have been bitten with the bug of wanderlust.”

“A little,” Gemma said, muffling a yawn. “But I would want to return to Verglas. I would miss its cold, white winters, and the way the frost dyes everything white and ice cuts intricate patterns like lace. Many believe Verglas is frozen tundra for most of the year, but I think it’s the most beautiful place in the world.”

“I see,” Stil said.

Gemma looked up at the mage. “You think I’m crazed.”

“No,” Stil said, his voice warm with understanding. “Verglas calls to all of us magic folk. There’s powerful magic here that can’t be found anywhere else. You are right. Verglas *is* the most beautiful place in the world.”

Gemma nodded. “I’m glad you think so, too,” she admitted, the ice in her eyes melting.

Gemma and Stil talked less as Gemma yawned more. Eventually, the young seamstress nodded off in a short stretch of silence.

Stil smiled down at her through the window grate. She was sleeping upright, slumped against the wall with the blankets mounded only waist

high. “You are going to get a crick in your neck, if you don’t catch a cold first,” he said.

Gemma exhaled, her breath deep with sleep.

Stil glanced over his shoulder before he flipped a small, wooden container off his belt. He opened it up and smeared his thumb in the greasy balm contained inside. He smeared the balm over the perimeter bars of the grille before screwing the container shut and sliding it back into place.

He whispered over the bars, making the spots smeared with the balm glow. Careful to not make too much noise, Stil pulled up on the window grille. The charmed bars separated like soft butter. He set the grill aside and dropped through the opening, landing inside the cell with a quiet tap. He crept to Gemma’s side and maneuvered her so she was lying down with blankets piled on her. He drew a worn quilt up to her chin and couldn’t help the affectionate smile that twitched on his lips. When sleeping, Gemma seemed less guarded and more relaxed. Without the sharpness of her eyes to counteract her plump, heart-shaped face, she looked younger and sweeter. Remembering the incident at the Sno Hauk tavern, Stil wondered if Gemma’s eyes would lack some of the sharpness if she had a better father.

“It’s fine. I like your eyes. They are like gems—exquisite,” Stil said, smoothing the blankets before he stood.

“Wait,” Gemma said, mostly asleep even though she struggled to lift her hand out of the blankets.

“Shh, go back to sleep,” Stil soothed.

“No, your heat charm,” Gemma murmured.

“Keep it,” Stil said.

Gemma briefly opened her eyes, flashing Stil with eyes that said she was unimpressed. “Too expensive.”

“Shhh,” Stil repeated, stepping back up to her to place a finger on her forehead.

Gemma had already fallen asleep again, several locks of her wavy hair plastered over her face.

Stil carefully tucked her hair behind her ear. He watched Gemma for a few moments as she slept before he shook himself. “If she wakes up, she’s going to accuse me of being a lecher,” he said, standing and striding across the room. He jumped off her stool and grabbed at the ceiling, pulling himself through the gaping hole of her ceiling-window. He set the grille

back in place and whispered the magic words of release, canceling his spell and returning the bars to their normal consistency.

Stil turned to go, but something made him pause and to look down at her one more time. “Goodnight, Gemma Kielland,” he said.

Gemma grunted.

Stil smiled before gliding away.

Chapter 9

"Lunch time, Miss Kielland," a guard cheerfully called through the door two days later as he unlocked it.

Gemma carefully put away her sewing supplies. "Hello, Børres," she said, greeting the guard she had previously hit with the stool with a twinge of guilt.

"Hello, Miss Kielland. Today I've got soup, fresh bread, and goat cheese for you," the guard said, giving Gemma a bright smile in spite of their previous violence spattered exchange.

"Thank you, I will enjoy it," Gemma said, making an effort to speak.

Børres bobbed a bow. "Shout when you're done—it can be hard to hear through the walls," he said, seeing himself out the door.

"I will," Gemma said, watching him go. When he shut the door behind himself, Gemma rubbed her forehead. "Poor man."

"You were doing what you had to."

Gemma jumped and whirled around to find Stil *inside* her cell. "Sir Mage," Gemma said after blinking twice.

"Good afternoon, Gemma," the mage said with an unreadable smile.

Gemma looked from her food to the mage. "Would you like something to eat?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you," Stil said. "I've come here to let you know I will be gone for a day or two."

"I see," Gemma said. She didn't understand why the mage felt the need to alert her to her schedule, until she realized that if King Torgen happened to get the prepared flax early, she would be sunk if Stil wasn't around. "Oh," Gemma said with new understanding.

"I've skulked about the castle a bit, and it is for certain that the flax won't arrive in at least four more days; however, I would rather not take the chance. So, I have brought you this," Stil said, holding his finger out.

"…It's a thimble," Gemma said.

"Yes, but it's magic."

Gemma raised both her eyebrows at him. "A magic *thimble*?"

Stil grinned. "It may be unorthodox, but the metal takes to summoning spells quite readily."

“Hm,” Gemma said, taking the thimble before she sat on the ground next to her little table of food. She sliced open a roll and spread soft goat cheese across it. “How is it magic?”

“Ah, that’s the important bit. If something happens and you need me, you can use the thimble to call me.”

“Oh?” Gemma said, eyeing the thimble on her finger before she stood up and marched across the room.

“Yes. It doesn’t work like a true summoning spell because it won’t transport me to your side—that’s high level that only a few genius Enchanters every century can manage—but I will hear your voice and know that you need me, and my matching thimble will guide me to yours.”

“I see,” Gemma said, offering the mage the roll. “You really had to use thimbles for this magic?”

“I’m a craftmage, not a weather mage. They care more about how things look, and they’re much showier. Thank you,” Stil said, taking the roll.

“I appreciate the trouble you are putting yourself through.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Stil said, leaning against the wall as he ate. “Although there is one last bit to the spell.”

“Yes?”

“When you call my name, you have to use my mage name.”

Gemma tilted her head. “Your mage name?”

Stil nodded. “Because I’m a craftmage, my power lies close with creation and naming, so I took up a mage name to give my spells an extra boost of power.”

“What is it?”

“You’re going to laugh.”

“So?”

Stil chuckled. “At least you’re honest. It’s Rumpelstiltskin.”

“It’s *what?*”

“Rumpelstiltskin.”

“Oh,” Gemma said, keeping her expression bland.

Stil’s lips quirked. “I can tell you are laughing on the inside, Gemma.”

“That’s not better than laughing openly?”

“Perhaps it is,” Stil said. “Your eyes glitter extra, which is enchanting.”

Surprised, Gemma opened and closed her mouth before furrowing her forehead as she tried to decipher what that meant. Stil finished his roll and watched her. The set of his lips said he was highly amused as Gemma tried to puzzle through it.

“I will need something to trade for the thimble,” he said after some moments when Gemma still hadn’t worked out an acceptable reply.

“Truly?” Gemma blinked.

“It’s a less valuable charm, so I don’t need much. You could give me a bit of whatever you’re making,” Stil said, nodding to the cape—which was coming along quite nicely—Gemma had folded and placed on the blankets.

Gemma pressed her lips together and wondered how she could refuse.

“Or a lock of your hair will do just as well,” Stil said.

Gemma frowned. “A lock of hair? That’s incredibly useless—although I suppose it isn’t as terrible as trading gold for more gold.”

Stil said nothing but wore a small smile.

“Very well. I will have to trade with a lock of hair—for I haven’t anything else. Unless you want another roll?”

“Your hair will be fine. It won’t take much,” Stil said, beckoning her closer with a finger.

Gemma approached the mage and stood very still when he flicked a hunting knife out of his cloak. He spun Gemma around and gently pulled a lock of her wild hair. “There,” he said when Gemma felt him release her hair.

The craftmage held up the lock—it was little more than the crazy, upward curl her hair ended with—for Gemma’s inspection. “Also, I will lend you this while I’m gone,” he said, passing over the ruby heat charm.

“I can’t. You just took that back yesterday,” Gemma argued.

“And you will need it even more while I am gone. It’s only going to get colder, and you sleep with an open grate in your ceiling,” Stil said.

“I don’t have anything I could trade for it.”

“You don’t have to. I will lend it to you,” Stil said, taking Gemma’s hand and placing the charm on her palm.

Instantly warmth started to flood Gemma, who looked doubtfully down at the charm. “I don’t think—,”

“Gemma, it’s fine,” Stil said, once again leaning back against the wall.

Gemma shrugged and changed the subject. “Where will you be going?” she asked, moving to place the charm on top of the cape.

“I have a bit of investigating to do.”

Gemma tilted her head. “Is the Veneno Conclave planning something?”

“No. That’s the problem,” Stil sighed.

“What?”

Stil brushed his hands off before moving to stand in front of her. “It’s nothing for you to worry about. You will be safe while I’m gone,” he said, placing his hands on her shoulders.

Gemma frowned. She did not like the brush off, but Stil was a *mage*. A mage who had saved her life twice, now. She allowed him to change the subject.

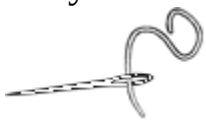
“And you will not hesitate to call for me,” Stil said, tapping a finger on her shoulder to get her attention.

“No,” Gemma agreed.

Still smiled. “Good,” he said, brushing a finger beneath her chin. “I will head out immediately, then. Enjoy your lunch,” the mage said.

Gemma turned to glance at the tray of food. “Yes, did you want—,” she cut herself off when she realized the mage was no longer in the cell with her.

Gemma shrugged. “Mages. They’re worse than cats.”



The following day, early in the morning, Gemma walked outside on the shores of Lake Sno with Foss and Rudd. There was no wind, but the temperatures were cold, and the previous night brought a hard frost, so everything from fence posts to tree leaves were white with the lacework of frost.

They had wandered close enough to Ostfold to hear the morning bustle as villagers went about their lives.

“Winter is nearly here,” Foss announced. “Have you got enough hay for your animals, Rudd?”

“We hope to sell one of the goats. If we don’t, it will be tight,” Rudd said.

Gemma turned her gaze from Ostfold to her guards. “You have animals?” She asked.

“Four goats, a flock of chickens, and a pig,” Rudd said.

“That’s quite a few,” Gemma said.

“My wife and children keep ‘em.”

“How enterprising of them,” Gemma said, only half listening. She could hear a bell ringing. But it wasn’t just any bell, it was a chime that she *knew*. It belonged to—

“Jo-Jo, stop this deer-prancing nonsense and walk like a respectable creature.”

“Grandmother Guri!” Gemma shouted, her jaw dropping with shock.

“Hello, my girl,” Grandmother Guri called as she picked her way among the rocks with a knobby cane. She dragged her white goat along behind her with a rope tied to the animal’s pretty, sky-blue collar and brass bell.

Gemma ran to greet her, throwing her arms around the short, old woman. Gemma was attacked by the desire to cry—and a tear or two might have gotten away from her—as she was enveloped by Grandmother Guri’s warm arms and scent of hay and cinnamon.

“Now, now. Everything is just fine,” Grandmother Guri said, patting Gemma on the back as she held her. “You’ve done well.”

Foss and Rudd stood a few feet away, looking like they wished they were a million miles away. They swapped expressions before each guard strolled in the opposite direction, giving Gemma and Grandmother Guri enough space to speak softly.

“What are you doing out here?” Gemma asked, impatiently flicking a tear from her eye when they finished hugging.

“I’m collecting herbs. I need some chives, and the only bunch in the area still alive is here by the lake. Jo-Jo is along to carry my things for me,” Grandmother Guri said, affectionately smacking the goat—who had saddle bags slung over her sides—on the rump.

Jo-Jo baaed and nibbled on Grandmother Guri’s bright red mittens before the old lady pulled her hands out of the goat’s range.

“So you’re still alive, eh?” Grandmother Guri asked as she squinted up at Gemma.

“How much have you heard?” Gemma asked.

“Bits and pieces. Gossip does run from the palace like gravy. People bring me the news they hear since they know you’re my girl. They said the King’s got it in his silly, cracked knob that you can spin straw into gold.”

“Flax fibers,” Gemma said.

Grandmother Guri swiped a hand through the air, brushing off the correction, and continued. “They also say you’ve been *doing* it.”

“They’ve been…misled,” Gemma said, glancing at Foss and Rudd, who were doing their best imitations of lakeside boulders.

“Oh?”

“Why don’t we sit down?” Gemma asked. “The story is…long.”

“Might as well, then. Won’t do my old bones a bit of good to stand that long. Get the packs from Jo-Jo; I’ve got a cushion in there,” Grandmother Guri said as she adjusted the red headscarf wrapped around her white hair.

After some maneuvering, Gemma and Grandmother Guri sat side by side on the saddlebags, a small blanket thrown over their laps. Jo-Jo grazed a few feet away but occasionally drew closer to nibble on Grandmother Guri’s thick, black skirt.

“Now. Start from the top—when King Torgen called you to the palace,” Grandmother Guri said.

Gemma’s tale spilled from her lips like snow in a snowstorm. It was a relief to tell someone about the threats, Gemma’s fright, and the long, dark hours. Grandmother Guri didn’t react when Gemma talked about Stil and everything he did for her. She snorted when Gemma described her escape and less than triumphant return, but for the most part the old woman was silent and thoughtful.

“That’s quite a story,” she said when Gemma finished.

“You believe me?”

“Course I do. You’re not a fanciful girl. If you said there was a mage, there was a mage. There must have been, or King Torgen woulda killed you at the first sunrise,” Grandmother Guri said.

“I tried to tell Lady Linnea. She thinks I’m covering for a lover,” Gemma said.

“She may be half right,” Grandmother Guri said.

“What do you mean?” Gemma frowned.

Grandmother Guri patted Gemma’s cheek. “It’s best to not worry about it yet, my girl. Though it is a shame you don’t know what this mage looks like. You should ask him to remove his hood.”

“Why?”

“So you can inspect the goods!”

Gemma almost choked on shock. “He’s a magic user. The man must be fifty if he’s a day!” she declared.

“Ah, but he is a mage, not an enchanter. Mages are done with their schooling sooner and don’t live as long. There’s a chance he’s young and handsome!” Grandmother Guri cackled.

“Grandmother.”

“It’s best to keep your options open.”

“Mages fancy mages. They leave us normal folk out of it—thank the heavens. Such courtships must be utterly *bizarre*.”

“And you make this judgment based on…?” Grandmother Guri asked, removing a mitten to unhook a small sack of nuts tied to her belt.

“My interactions with Stil. He follows the most strange and complicated rules of magic that I have ever heard of,” Gemma said. “He will spin enough gold to purchase a manor, and do it in exchange for one gold ring. He lends me an expensive charmed ruby but asks for a trade for a *thimble*.”

“He is a bit unstable,” Grandmother Guri said. “So what will you do?”

“About?”

“About the King and this spinning. I assume this mage cannot be at your beck and call forever. Eventually you will have to leave, or King Torgen will discover the truth.”

“I have hopes that eventually I will talk the King into allowing me to spin without guards posted, and I can escape then.”

“You cannot talk the King into anything, my girl,” Grandmother Guri said, looking in the direction of the palace.

“Yes, but if he wants the gold badly enough, he will do what I ask,” Gemma said.

“Bartering with the crazed is like baiting a rabid bear,” Grandmother Guri warned.

“What else can I do?” Gemma asked.

“There aren’t many alternatives,” Grandmother Guri admitted. “But if you flee, you cannot stay in Ostfold.”

“No,” Gemma agreed.

“Nor can you stay in Verglas.”

“No,” Gemma repeated.

“Does that bother you?” Grandmother Guri asked.

“A little. I love Verglas. While I would enjoy seeing other countries, I cannot fathom a time when I would not think of Verglas as my home.”

“It is a wild, magical country. But you can carry it in your heart, and Verglas will always you welcome back—whether you stay here forever or you are gone for fifty years. Leave if you must, my girl,” Grandmother Guri said.

“If I flee, I will leave everyone I love.”

Grandmother Guri was silent for a long time. Gemma knew better than to disturb the woman while she thought, and she waited patiently for the reply.

“Escape,” Grandmother Guri finally said. “It’s your best chance. You’re a smart girl; I’m sure you’ll make friends wherever you go. And you might not be alone.”

“You think Lady Linnea would go with me?” Gemma asked.

Before Grandmother Guri could reply, Jo-Jo wandered up to the pair. She sneezed on them both before shaking her hand, smacking Gemma with her ears.

“You darned goat!” Grandmother Guri shouted.

Jo-Jo pranced away, evading Grandmother Guri’s cane.

Gemma almost fell over in an effort to also avoid Grandmother Guri’s flailing.

“Miss Kielland?”

“Yes?” Gemma said, as she looked up at Foss.

“We should probably return to the palace.”

“Yes. Thank you, Foss,” Gemma said before she stood up and dusted herself off.

“Help an old lady up,” Grandmother Guri said as she started to haul herself to her feet.

Gemma rushed to help her. When Grandmother Guri was safe and adjusting her clothes, Gemma folded the blanket, stowed it in the saddle bags, and retrieved the mischievous Jo-Jo.

“Thank you,” Grandmother Guri said, taking the goat’s lead when Gemma brought her back.

Gemma nodded and stooped over to hug the older woman. “I’ve missed you,” she whispered.

“And I have missed you. Take care, my girl. Send word when you can,” she said, kissing Gemma’s cheek before releasing her.

Gemma nodded. “Of course. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, child.”

Gemma thought she was getting used to a life of imprisonment and a murky lifespan. But her heart clenched tight in her chest as she forced herself to walk away, leaving Grandmother Guri behind as a bright spot on the lakeshore.

Chapter 10

Stil adjusted the fall of his worn cape on his shoulders as he cautiously poked through the forest. The border Verglas shared with Kozlovka was just ahead, but there was no sign of the hellhound, nightmare, or the rider.

Stil looked back at the setting sun. “I should further investigate tomorrow in daylight,” he said, taking another step forward. “But I don’t think a quick look will hurt.”

It was risky to spy out the enemy’s movement at sunset when the rider moved only at night. Some might even say it was stupid, but the threat couldn’t be too imminent. It was unlikely the rider was still around.

Stil chuckled as he pictured what Gemma would do if she knew the risk he was taking.

She wouldn’t say anything, just give him that look that said she questioned his intelligence and arch her expressive eyebrows at him.

“Ahh, yes. Gemma,” Stil said. *I have no idea what I’m going to do about her*.

Stil had decided to help her when he first heard that someone had brought news to the king about her father’s drunken utterances. Stil had a feeling it was the weasel-like thug he silenced at the tavern fight. Feeling partially responsible, and with Angelique’s lecture about responsibility beating in his head, Stil knew he had to help her.

He just hadn’t expected her to be so…*self-sacrificing* and *vibrant*.

Most would say Gemma wasn’t an expressive girl. She generally kept her mouth shut and usually spoke words that were as prickly as a thistle.

Stil disagreed.

She’s expressive alright. But it’s in her eyes—the way they shift from ice when she’s upset to sapphires when she’s happy, he thought.

And that didn’t even touch on her noble character. Who would escape certain death only to turn around and go back because they realized they would cause the death of those who served as their wardens?

No one.

No one, except Gemma.

Feeling the need to speak it out loud, as though making it final, Stil said, “Leaving her is no longer an option.”

It was then Stil realized he had left Verglas while musing over the seamstress. He whirled around, taking in the bare trees and the lack of the Verglas pines and firs.

Uttering an oath under his breath, he ran back in the direction from which he had come, cursing his stupidity.

There was a snarl, and the hellhound leapt in front of Stil, cutting him off.

“Fire,” Stil said, throwing a red feather in the beast’s face. The feather exploded into an inferno of fire, forcing the hellhound backwards.

The beast whipped its head and howled as Stil ran north.

The nightmare answered the hellhound with a snort, bursting out of murky darkness with its flaming eyes.

Stil slipped his hunting knife out from under his cloak as he ran parallel to the nightmare and its rider. “Sorry,” Stil said to a tree, his hand scraping the rough bark. “Cleave,” he said before slicing the knife straight through trunks of several trees.

The nightmare shrieked angrily and lunged to get out of the way.

Stil took the opportunity to start running east, back into Verglas.

The hellhound was back, snarling and panting on Stil’s heels. “Of course you always find me in the wild. Not in the city where I could use the very ground against you,” he said, flicking a ribbon from under his cloak. “Bind,” he said, throwing the ribbon at the animal. The ribbon wrapped around the beast’s snout, muzzling it as though it were made of iron. The hellhound scratched at it and tried to flex its mouth, but the ribbon held. Stil reached under his cloak and popped out the only real weapon he had—a metal bar roughly the length and thickness of his forearm. “*Cudere*!” he shouted, throwing it into the air. Stil jumped aside to dodge the nightmare and was almost shot by the rider, who loaded another bolt into his crossbow.

Still muzzled, the hellhound leapt for Stil—claws extended—just as Stil’s weapon came slicing downwards, glowing as metal grew and extended, forming a double tipped spear taller than Stil. One tip had metal wings at the base of the spearhead. The other end had a curved blade that was sharp on only one edge; the other edge was covered by decorative metal work and gems.

Stil caught it, bringing it up just in time to guard against the black claws, although he was driven back by the force.

“Blaze!” Stil said. The spear erupted in light, temporarily blinding the mongrel. Stil whirled the spear over his head and shoved the curved end out behind him. He countered another arrow—which made the weapon flash like lightning when it was struck.

The hellhound and the nightmare shrieked, and Stil ran.

Where is it? *I couldn’t have walked too far into Kozlovka*! Stil thought as he ran, ducking just in time to avoid an arrow.

Stil almost drooped in relief when he spotted a pine tree. He had to be getting close! He planted his feet and, using his momentum, spun. He slid his spear across his left arm and braced it with his right. He landed a direct blow to the hellhound’s head, knocking the creature to the ground but failing to draw any blood.

Stil cursed and ran again. Being a craftmage, he hadn’t trained much for fights. That failing was painfully obvious to him as the cold air stung his lungs while he sprinted.

Stil grabbed a leaf while on the run and used his magic to shape it into a snowflake. “Home,” he said. The snowflake glowed, and forty feet away, an opalescent line shot through the ground. He was almost there.

The nightmare screamed somewhere behind him. He swung, releasing his spear, which sliced through the air with glittering edges.

The nightmare swung so the rider could block it with his short sword, but the loss of the weapon lightened Stil and let him sprint unhindered.

He closed the distance between himself and the Verglas border as the rider spurred his mount on, catching up.

Still almost took an arrow to the shoulder, but he darted to the side just in time.

He was so close!

The nightmare jumped, closing the gap.

“Go bother a war mage!” Stil shouted as he threw himself across the border.

The nightmare skid to a stop, shrieking as the Snow Queen’s power exploded into an icy wall of sharp, glittering ice shards.

Stil panted and peeled himself off the ground, rubbing the sore shoulder he landed on.

On the other side of the frosted wall, the nightmare screamed and the hellhound howled.

Stil groaned and shook his head to clear his sight and mind. “That was fair stupid of me,” he admitted, taking inventory of his body as he stood.

He was going to be stiff the following day, but there were no injuries.

The nightmare snorted, having traveled a few feet down the border to peer around the ice shield.

The rider shot his loaded crossbow, but the arrow was blocked by ice that shot out of the ground and snapped around the weapon with frigid jaws.

“*Cudere*,” Stil called, forcing his arm up. His double-ended spear trembled for a moment before it whirled through the air, as if thrown. It easily broke through the ice wall, sending a cascade of ice shards everywhere. Stil caught the weapon and twirled it once to rid it of ice flecks before he brandished it at the rider.

He toed the border line and took a swipe at the nightmare with the curved tip. The beast barely avoided it and screamed in anger as it backed up.

Stil waggled the weapon at the rider. “Well?” he said.

The nightmare snorted as the rider lowered the crossbow. The rider turned the animal and road off into the inky darkness, the hellhound following them.

Stil backed farther into Verglas and shook his head. “I have no idea what any of this is about,” he sighed.

Lady Linnea grunted as she swung her leg over the palace wall, dropping into the small area above Gemma’s cell. “Gemma, I have got news for you. Sissel just about took down Malfrid when Malfrid… Gemma?” Lady Linnea said, kneeling down to press her face against the window grate and peer inside.

Gemma was not in her cell.

“Is she out walking?” Lady Linnea wondered, fixing the shawl she had tied over her blonde hair. “No, her cape is here, and the mittens I brought her. They can’t have moved her, or she would have taken her things…” Lady Linnea trailed off, her heart crawling into her throat.

Where was Gemma?

Had King Torgen called for her? Had he figured out how she got the gold thread and beheaded her?

“Gemma,” Lady Linnea hissed into the empty cell.

There was no response.

Her heart pounding, Lady Linnea scrambled to stand up.

What happened to Gemma? Where was she? How could she find out?

Lady Linnea franticly climbed the wall and flew into palace, looking for the one person who could help her. She needed to find Toril.

“What is it?” Prince Toril said, skidding into the palace gardens. He was half undressed, wearing only black knee-length trousers, a linen shirt, knee-high socks, and buckled shoes in the cold, biting air. Clearly he was in the middle of something when he received Lady Linnea’s panicked message via a servant.

“Gemma is gone!” Lady Linnea said.

“What?”

“Your father must have done something. She isn’t in her cell!”

“The guards occasionally take her for walks; she’s probably out on one right now,” Prince Toril said, the wind ruffling his hair.

“NO!” Lady Linnea said. “Her cape and that black, wool thing she’s been working on are still in her cell. If she were outside or set free, she wouldn’t have left them behind. She’s gone!”

Toril exhaled and set his shoulders before looked decisively to Lady Linnea. “Come,” he said, offering his hand.

Lady Linnea took it and the pair ran indoors, a pleasant change from the raging winds. Prince Toril led Lady Linnea through the hallways at a quick, ground-covering walk.

Several times, the pair ran into servants who watched with wide eyes but said nothing as their future monarch and the beautiful Lady Linnea—almost all the palace servants recognized her on sight now as the girl Prince Toril occasionally snuck out to see—marched through the palace.

They reached the dungeon stairs and clattered down them, leaving the light, airy architecture of the palace and swapping it for the oppressive dungeons.

When they were almost to the base of the stairs, Lady Linnea cut in front of Prince Toril to take the lead. She jumped down the last two steps, her heart beating frantically, when she recognized the sound of…Gemma’s laughter.

Lady Linnea and Prince Toril poked their heads around the corner.

In the middle of the dungeon aisle, lounging on cushions and crowded around a table that was barely a foot off the ground, were Gemma and three guards.

“Considering you were the one who wanted to teach her how to play, Captain, you’re doing terrible,” one of the guards said.

“It’s four cards for each person, right?” Gemma asked, dealing cards.

“Yes,” the guard captain, recognizable by his uniform, sighed. “If you and Skoglund win another trick, that will put you in the majority, and you’ve won the game. I hope it’s not boring you?”

“Oh, no. It’s quite entertaining,” Gemma said. Although her words were bland, her eyes glowed with mischief.

“I claim Miss Kielland for the next round. You can have the captain,” the third guard said.

“Having a change of heart about partners, Foss?” Gemma’s card partner asked.

“You betcha. I didn’t think I would have to carry Captain through the whole game,” the guard said.

“Might I remind you, Foss, that *I’m* the one who will be writing your recommendation—or demotion—to the Guard Lieutenant?” the captain said.

“Yes, *sir*!” Foss said with a salute, drawing an amused, arched eyebrow from Gemma.

“She looks fine,” Prince Toril whispered in Lady Linnea’s ear. “She’s just playing Karnöffel—and doing well, I think. Lady Linnea!” he hissed when Lady Linnea sank to the ground, relief making her light-headed.

“I’m fine. I just,” Lady Linnea couldn’t continue and instead shut her eyes and rested her head against the grimy dungeon wall.

“She’s safe,” Prince Toril said.

“Yes,” Lady Linnea smiled. “She is.”

After a moment Prince Toril asked, “Are you strong enough to stand? I would prefer to not let them know we are here,” he said, tipping his head in the direction of the chattering card game.

“I can manage,” Lady Linnea said, standing. Her legs shook like a newborn foal, but she brushed off her dress—which was dirtied beyond repair—and heaved her chin up, regaining some of her confidence.

“May I escort you out?” Prince Toril asked, offering his arm.

Lady Linnea took it with the composure of a queen and allowed Prince Toril to lead her up the dungeon stairs.

"I find it refreshing that you care so much about your servant," Prince Toril said, breaking the silence when they returned to the palace hallways. "She is lucky to have such a caring mistress."

"She is my close companion," Lady Linnea said.

"Yes, because you allow her to be so," Prince Toril said.

"Wait, you think that this is just a case of me being kind to a servant because I am a loyal person?"

"Yes?" Prince Toril said.

"Huh. I'm beginning to see why you didn't go after Princess Elise," Lady Linnea said, dropping Prince Toril's arm.

"What do you mean?" Prince Toril asked.

"I don't think you understand the balance of relationships. They are give-and-take. I'm not Gemma's superior in our friendship because I'm trying to get her through this alive—which is rather what I suspect you think. I'm frantic to protect her, yes, not because I'm some bleeding-heart noble, but because Gemma is my best friend," Lady Linnea firmly said. "Gemma has my loyalty because she's earned it, and I have Gemma's trust because *I've* earned it."

"But surely you have more to give," Prince Toril said.

"You would think that, and perhaps that is the circumstance right now, but before I felt like I could never repay Gemma for everything she's done for me," Lady Linnea said. She tilted her head and studied Prince Toril with pursed lips. "It takes work to build a lasting relationship, My Lord. You cannot expect someone to give you their everything just because."

"I don't think I understand," Prince Toril said.

"I'm not surprised, looking at your sparkling parentage," Lady Linnea said, stopping their stroll down the hallway. "Allow me to rephrase it. A friendship is filled only with as much love as *you* give. Gemma has my heart because I chose to give it to her. And my choice paid off, because there is no one in this horrible, tattered world that I trust more than Gemma Kielland. And so we are two best friends, walking together to achieve what neither of us could do alone. Do you understand it now?"

Prince Toril wore a very sad smile, one that pained Lady Linnea to see on the normally sunny—if not slightly dopey—prince's face. "Princess Elise said something similar to me, once."

“Oh?”

“She said she wasn’t the only woman capable of deep love, and that before I found such a woman who would love me like that, I had to learn how to give that kind of love, too,” Prince Toril said. “She meant the give-and-take loyalty you’re talking about, didn’t she?”

“Yes,” Lady Linnea said.

“I see it, now,” Prince Toril said, looking up at the ceiling. “You have given me much to think about, Lady Linnea,” he said when he finally lowered his gaze.

“I am glad. I would rather have you learn about it now, Toril, than to continue in ignorance,” Lady Linnea said.

“Yes. I think so, too…” Prince Toril trailed off before he shook himself, putting a smile back on his face. “In any case, I will show you a way out. I have an appointment with a Farset ambassador that I will be late for if I do not hurry. This way.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I’ve brought your lunch, Miss Kielland,” Børres said, setting her tray down. “Meatcakes, carrots, and potatoes.”

“Thank you, Børres,” Gemma said, smiling at the guard.

“You’re welcome. The captain said I was to tell you that tonight the King will have you spin again,” Børres said, apologetically bobbing like a duck on rough water.

Gemma nodded, expecting as much. “Thank you for the warning.”

“Of course, miss. Enjoy your lunch,” Børres said, slipping out of the dungeon.

Gemma sighed and felt for the braid of black and silver thread she had tied around her neck, cradling Stil’s heat charm and magic thimble.

It had been several nights, and he hadn’t yet returned. Should she call him?

“It seems my timing is perfect, then.”

Gemma looked up to find Stil relaxing next to the ceiling grate, looking as if he had been there for the past few minutes.

“Sir Mage, how was your journey?” Gemma asked.

“It didn’t go quite as I planned,” he said, adjusting his hood so it fell lower, although he gave Gemma a lopsided smile. “But I am alive and in

once piece, and I returned at the perfect hour."

"So it would seem."

"Unfortunately I must go. I came only to tell you that I am back," the mage said.

"Thank you. Oh—here," Gemma said, trying to untangle the ruby heat charm.

"Keep it for now. You can give it to me when I see you tonight," Stil said. "And you might want to ask the guards for some shutters if the King is going to keep you cooped up here," he added before slipping from the ledge, disappearing from sight.

With the mage gone, Gemma turned her attention to the black wool cape folded and stowed in the corner. "I wonder if I have enough time to finish it before tonight…"

Chapter 11

Gemma carried the nearly finished wool cape—she had a little embroidery left on one shoulder—as well as her own cloak, the last of the silver thread she would need, her needles, and the mittens and various weaponry Lady Linnea had smuggled in.

A guard—Foss—had warned her before they left the cell that she would want her cloak.

Gemma had wondered why, but now—as the guards escorted her through the chilly wind and a few snowflakes fell—she understood.

The guards led her outside the castle, to a tall, crumbling tower that was separated from the palace and pushed into the forest border. The men wrestled the door open and nudged Gemma inside.

The interior of the tower was just as shabby as the exterior. The floor was smooth stone—worn from age and use, not from excellent craftsmanship—and the tower stretched so high the ceiling disappeared into darkness. Torches were posted on the walls, casting a cheerful glow that the tower couldn't absorb. There were windows—barred of course. A few retained the original glass panes, but most had been broken over the ages and were badly boarded up so the whistling wind still managed to pry in through cracks and holes.

The tower felt similar to the palace dungeons in that it oozed with dark feelings. However, while the dungeons felt oppressive, the tower was soaked with desperation and sadness.

Part of that might have been its contents.

Piled everywhere, in stacks taller than Gemma, were bundles of flax fibers.

A crew of spinners wouldn't be able to spin the immense amount of flax King Torgen had stock-piled. It was possible that Stil wouldn't be able to save Gemma this time.

Standing in front of the sea of flax were King Torgen and Prince Toril.

"Gemma Kielland," King Torgen said, the sags under his eyes and the too-sharp plains of his face were dark, giving him a fiendish look.

Gemma clutched the wool cape closer and bobbed a curtsey.

“Tonight, you will spin all this flax into gold,” King Torgen said, gesturing to the piles and piles of flax. “And if you don’t, I will have you beheaded. If you do succeed, you will marry me and become Queen of Verglas.”

Gemma paused. “I beg your pardon, My Lord?”

“If you manage to finish all the spinning, you will be my queen,” King Torgen said. His sick smile said he knew Gemma would not enjoy this.

“What if I do not wish to, My Lord?” Gemma asked.

The guards tensed, worried the king would retaliate, but he only laughed. “Tonight’s outcome has very little to do with what you *wish*, Gemma Kielland. If you can spin flax into gold I will see you chained to me, even if it means I must put the shackles on you myself. You could marry Toril, the coward, if you wished.”

Gemma took a step back, repulsed. To marry the mad king—a man who would plot to have her killed? Or to marry his son and become the *daughter-in-law* to such a twisted creature? Who knew what atrocities he would carry out? He left Toril alone, but Gemma doubted King Torgen would leave her be, no matter whom she married.

King Torgen laughed at Gemma’s look of revulsion.

“Choose wisely, Gemma Kielland, lest you regret it,” King Torgen said, strolling to the door. His path took him close to Gemma. He leaned into her, his breath reeking of decay. “Guards will be posted outside. They will bring you to me tomorrow, as my bride, or one on death-row.”

“No,” Gemma said, her voice strong.

King Torgen narrowed his eyes. “No?”

“No, there will be no guards posted outside the tower. The lower windows are glass; they could easily look in. My…skill will raise a ruckus, and no one may hear the noises I make or—,”

“The flax will not turn into gold. I am aware of your little ruse, Gemma Kielland. The guards stay,” King Torgen said, grabbing a chunk of Gemma’s wild hair and pulling.

“Then you will not get so much as a strand of gold from me,” Gemma said, her voice strong and her posture confident in spite of her prickling scalp.

“Don’t play games you cannot win, girl,” King Torgen growled, pulling harder.

Gemma ignored her pain and met King Torgen's glare with the presence of a commanding general. "After tonight, I will have spun enough gold to pay off half the country's debts, and you are ripping me from my family and friends to bring me into yours. No guards. That is my price for the deeds you have forced from me."

King Torgen's upper lip curled back in a sneer. He released Gemma's hair and pushed her backwards.

"As you wish," King Torgen said with a pseudo-pleasant smile. "No guards will stand on duty tonight."

King Torgen swept outdoors, the wind yanking on his clothes and hair.

"I'm sorry," Prince Toril said before he followed his father outside.

"Are you alright, Miss Kielland?" the guard captain asked when the door ominously slammed shut.

Gemma took in a shaky breath but set her shoulders and chin. "Yes," she said, her voice strong. "Will he keep his bargain?"

"You mean will he refrain from posting guards? I think so. His anger indicates he will," the captain said.

Gemma nodded. "Thank you."

"Are you going to escape?" Foss asked.

"I don't know," Gemma honestly replied.

The guards exchanged glances and nodded.

"It's been a pleasure to be in your service," the captain said as his men saluted Gemma. "I wish it could have been under different circumstances."

"Thank you for your kindness," Gemma said.

The captain also saluted Gemma before he motioned for his men to follow him and exit the tower.

The howling wind rampaged indoors while the guards filed out, making the torches flicker. When the door slammed shut, Gemma heard the familiar groan of a bar being dropped into place, and a lock turning.

Gemma ran a hand through her wavy hair. "Now what?" she wondered.

When Stil banged into the tower an hour or so later, Gemma was pacing back and forth in front of the flax.

"Good evening," Stil said, brushing snowflakes from his cloak.

"I am in a great deal of trouble, Sir Mage," Gemma said, still pacing.

"What is wrong?" Stil asked.

“You *must* let me out of the tower so I can run.”

“Gemma, have you seen the weather? I can’t let you flee in this,” Stil said.

Gemma stopped in front of Stil and whirled to face him, every muscle in her body tight with agitation. “Then you may as well kill me now. I would rather be dead than be married into that demon’s family!”

Surprised by the outburst, Stil reached out and placed his warm hands on Gemma’s shoulder. “No matter what happens tonight, you will be safe. Now, please explain—everything.”

“The base bargain is still the same. If I don’t spin all of this into gold, King Torgen will have me killed.”

“I expected that,” Stil said, squeezing Gemma’s shoulders before he released her and approached the spinning wheel. He wet his fingers and started pulling flax from the distaff to get the machine running.

“Yes, well he’s gone and added a *benefit*. If all the flax is spun, he will marry me and make me his queen!” Gemma said, spitting the words out like they were bile.

“He *what*?” Stil said, turning around incredulously.

“I know,” Gemma said, shaking her head.

“That does change things a great deal,” Stil said, seating himself on a rickety chair. He folded his arms across his chest as he thought, occasionally nudging the spinning wheel to make it run.

“It seems running is your only viable option,” he said.

“Yes,” Gemma emphatically nodded.

“But you can’t leave right now.”

“Why not?”

“The weather is terrible, and these days I prefer not to travel at night,” Stil said, turning so his fine lips and chin were pointed in the direction of a glass window.

“Forgive my bluntness, Sir Mage, but I fail to see what your travel preferences have to do with me.”

The mage tilted his head. “You can’t really think I would allow you to set off into the wilds alone.”

“If you open the tower door for me, that will be more than sufficient help,” Gemma said.

“No,” Stil said, rejecting the idea.

“Sir Mage, Stil,” Gemma said, trying again. “You have done so much to aid me. I cannot count on you any longer.”

“Fine,” Stil said, and Gemma sagged with relief until the mage spoke again. “Then I choose to tag along as your extra baggage.”

“What?!”

“I’m going with you, Gemma.”

Gemma opened and closed her mouth twice before saying, “*Why*?” in a voice that indicated the mage had lost his wits.

“Because I want to see you safe.”

“Craftmage Stil,” Gemma said, drawing her shoulders up and facing Stil with the same bravado with which she had faced King Torgen. “You need not be concerned with your obligation to help the weak. Once I am free, I will be my own responsibility.”

“Your flight has nothing to do with my obligation,” Stil countered. “Also, I find it interesting that it takes a marriage proposal to make you animated and talkative.”

Gemma clenched both of her hands in fists before shouting, “You cannot lead me around like a *goat* for the rest of my life!”

Stil laughed at the comparison.

“STIL!”

“I know, I’m sorry,” the mage laughed, holding his sides.

Gemma rolled her eyes in disgust and waited for his laughter to subside.

“Gemma, I am concerned for you not because of any mage code or responsibility, but because I genuinely like you,” Stil said.

Gemma pushed an eyebrow up.

“It’s true,” Stil said.

“Forgive my disbelief, but magic users rarely make friends with civilians. Royalty? Perhaps. Scholars, occasionally. But seamstresses from Ostfold? Never,” Gemma flatly said.

“I see your point, but the attachment is already made. Now, if we are traveling together, I owe you an explanation for my reluctance to travel at night.”

“Sir Mage,” Gemma groaned.

“I’m in Verglas not for any great reason, except that I am being tracked by a creature of darkness, and he cannot force his way past the Snow Queen’s residual magic.”

Gemma's protests died on her lips.

Stil gave Gemma a wry grin. "You see, you are not the only one who is a harbinger of trouble. I have no idea why I am being chased or to what ends. I only know he rides a nightmare and controls a hellhound."

Gemma wordlessly plopped down on a stool near Stil's chair. *So that was why he reacted so oddly to news of the hellhound tracks,* she realized.

"He has been chasing me for the better part of a year and following me for much longer. At first, I was able to keep well ahead of him with ease. But he grew stronger, somehow. By the time I finally thought to head to Mullberg to get to the Veneno Conclave, it was too late. The rider and his animals gained so much strength through darkness that they almost caught me. Thankfully I managed to escape to Verglas, and I have been trapped here ever since, for well over a month."

"But…you're a mage," Gemma said.

"*Craftmage*, Gemma. My fighting capabilities are limited."

"No, no, no," Gemma said, waving her hand as if she could wash his words away. "I mean, you're a mage. Wouldn't other magical folk from the Veneno Conclave help you?"

"I can't flee there. The mountains between Mullberg and Verglas would be the perfect place for the rider to trap me. I've tried sending out word, but magic users are spread thin already."

Gemma tilted her head. "What? Whatever for?"

"You are disconnected from it all as the Snow Queen's magic has held your borders, but the rest of the world is under direct assault by darkness," Stil grimly said. "The Sole crown princess—the *only* heir to the Sole throne—has fallen into a cursed sleep. There's a powerful, black sorcerer who has been plaguing Kozlovka for years, but they stupidly didn't think to tell the Conclave about it until recently. Trolls are troubling Farset, and goblins are raiding in Erlauf. No one knows what's happening in Ringsted. The Chronos Mountains are impassable, and the coast is riddled with giant storms. It takes multiple weather mages to force clear seas for sailing."

Gemma was quiet for a time. "You are serious."

"Deathly so."

"I never knew—I don't think anyone in Verglas knows."

"It's excusable. All of Verglas has been occupied dancing to the tune of your mad, crazed king."

Gemma shook her head.

“And it’s not all bad,” Stil continued. “A prince of Loire was cursed for three or so years. He broke it not quite two years ago, which is fortuitous because Loire has been instrumental in cracking down on any sort of darkness. Erlauf is about to crown a new queen, and she’s brilliant. With her at the head of the country and her husband in the army, they will squash the goblin uprisings.”

“What you aren’t saying is that the world is in great upheaval, and you are forced to go at this alone as a result,” Gemma said.

Stil shrugged. “The rider is strongest at night. It wouldn’t be untrue to say light is his weakness—he won’t move in it, anyway, and he and his animals fear it. He can’t get into Verglas, but somehow he’s still tracking me. I have tried moving from one end of Verglas to the other, and he waits for me on the border. I know it may sound like traveling with me will be more dangerous than if you were to move alone, but as long as we are in Verglas, it will be fine.”

“Sir Mage,” Gemma said, her voice tight with pain. “The point is I will have to *leave* Verglas.”

“I can get you to a border and hide you better and in more comfort. One of my companions should arrive soon to aid us. I’ve received word that she has recently resurfaced in the southern kingdoms.”

She? Gemma raised her eyebrows at the pronoun and the soft smile Stil wore. *The last thing I need is to get involved in a mage’s love affair*.

“So, we will flee together,” Stil concluded.

“Who is this rider who chases you?” Gemma asked.

“I don’t think ‘who’ is the right word. He’s not human. The rider is…” the mage was quiet for a moment, his expression tight. “The rider is darkness wrapped around death. He hasn’t a soul—he’s too evil for that. There is nothing human-like about him except for the shape of his body. He’s the worst nightmare you can imagine, and his darkness is the kind that tempts people to do evil things. He is hatred, and he hungers for bloodshed and the agony of others.”

Gemma’s throat closed at the description.

Stil wasn’t being chased by a lightweight, evil sorcerer. He had a creature of darkness on his trail.

A few minutes passed before Gemma was able to summon a safer subject to discuss.

“Do you intend to go hooded the whole time? We’ll be in trouble if you take it off—I’ll never be able to find you again,” she dryly said.

Stil tilted his head.

“Being that I have no idea what you look like,” Gemma said.

“Oh,” Stil said. “I apologize; I had forgotten. I’ve been going hooded to avoid King Torgen’s attention.”

“Are you famous?” Gemma asked.

Stil hesitated. “Yes, I suppose,” he said, before flipping off his hood.

Gemma worked hard to keep her mask of indifference in place. Stil was a handsome as stories told round the campfire made royal princes out to be. His nose—matching his fine lips and chin—was long and slender, setting off his high cheekbones and flawless skin. His eyes were a dynamic spattering of blue—the same color as the sky with circles of royal blue slicing through to the center.

His hair was blue-black—like a night sky. The front was feathered but the back was long and silky, pulled into a low ponytail that disappeared into his cloak.

To be frank, Stil was the most handsome man Gemma had seen—and she had caught a glimpse of the famed Arcainian princes! She knew magic users were supposed to better looking than the general population, but this was ridiculous!

“Hm,” Gemma said.

“Hm? That is all you have to say,” Stil frowned.

“Were you expecting a scream of horror?”

“No,” Stil said. “It’s only—well, I know I’m nothing compared to an enchanter, but most find me attractive.”

“Tsk,” Gemma said, turning her back to the craftmage. “When do we leave?”

Stil sighed and muttered under his breath.

“You do not want to travel in the dead of night, but the closer we get to dawn, the easier it will be for King Torgen to find us,” Gemma said, peering out of a glass window.

“We need to wait until after midnight. Even if King Torgen does not have guards posted, I imagine he will personally watch the tower for some time,” Stil said.

“You think he will have missed your arrival?” Gemma asked.

Stil smiled, and Gemma could see that his eyes gleamed and crinkled with the gesture. “After the way I arrived the first time you had to complete this impossible task, do you really think I can’t move without being seen?”

“True,” Gemma shrugged. She looked past Stil to eye the spinning machine. “But if we are going to run, why do you spin?”

“Distraction. When King Torgen sees how much gold is present, he will forget about you for a while—I imagine,” Stil said, adding more fibers to the distaff.

“You cannot possibly spin it all.”

“No, and I won’t. But I can get enough done to be a proper distraction,” Stil said. “Although I will still need a payment.”

Gemma glanced at the wool cape she had worked on since the second night Stil saved her. It wasn’t finished yet. She couldn’t give it to him. “I don’t have any gold. I have a few dull weapons—hand axes and the like.”

“Hmm,” Stil said, rubbing his chin as he thought.

His scrutiny was a little more uncomfortable to bear now that Gemma could see his uncommonly handsome face fixed on her.

“Perhaps…” Stil said, strolling to her side.

“Yes?” Gemma said, turning away from the window.

Stil smiled widely. “How about your firstborn child?” he said, speaking slowly, like a cat rubbing against furniture.

Gemma stopped thinking altogether. ‘What?” she asked, slumping against the tower wall.

Stil planted a hand on either side of her head, boxing her in. “Your firstborn child will be mine,” Stil said, the words coming more confidently this time.

Gemma raised an eyebrow. “That is quite a hefty raise in price.”

“Supply and demand,” Stil winked.

Gemma shrugged. “Deal.”

Stil dropped his hands and blinked in surprise. “You agree so easily?”

“I don’t plan to have children.”

“I see.”

“Does that cancel out the negotiation?”

“No. It will be my own fault if I never collect my payment,” Stil said, flipping his ponytail over his shoulder. “Just see that you remember it as

well," he warned, his cloak swirling around him as he returned to the spinning wheel.

"Of course."

"You'll need to remove the…items you carry under your clothes," Still called over his shoulder. "We will be moving swiftly, and I'm not certain how well you can sprint with a hand axe secured somewhere in your skirt."

"I suppose so," Gemma said.

"If you need something to stow your goods in, I have a bag I can lend you. That cloak won't do either, but we'll have to wait until we reach my camp to give you a different one. I haven't any on me at the moment."

"I'm fine," Gemma said.

Stil snorted. "You are as fine as a winter pony heading to the desert. You need to be better equipped."

"Your prices are too high for me to accept anything," Gemma said. "I will not give you a second- and third-born child for a cape and a bag."

"Don't be silly," Stil said. "The first one is the only one I should need to make you promise for."

"What?"

"Nothing. Anyway, giving you things—like bags and capes—doesn't involve my magic, so there is no need to trade," Stil said, tossing Gemma a silk, drawstring bag roughly the size of her hand.

"I'm going to need a bigger bag," she said.

"That one should fit all of your things. It's charmed—like my tent."

"You are speaking in riddles tonight."

"Try putting things inside it, and you'll see what I mean," Stil said, grabbing a length of flax and adding it to the spinning wheel's distaff.

Gemma rolled up the sleeve of her brown Lovland uniform—which had seen better days after weeks of living in a dungeon—and slid out the dull butter-knife that was hooked on her cuff.

She dropped the knife into the silk bag, and was surprised when the knife—which was taller than the bag was long—disappeared inside.

"See? Charmed. So where are you hiding the axe?" Stil asked with a sly smirk. He tilted his head and swept his eyes up and down Gemma's body with interest.

Gemma ignored the question and circled behind a flax pile to finish disarming herself without being gawked at.

In addition to the useful items Lady Linnea had passed off to Gemma, Gemma was able to fit her thread, needles, and the wool cape inside the silk bag, which remained the size of a handbag.

“Our plan is this,” Stil said when Gemma finished exploring the depths of her borrowed bag. “Tonight, we will try to make for my camp. I’ve been hanging around Ostfold, but my camp is a four- or five-hour journey south. Ideally, we should reach it shortly after dawn.”

“What do we do when the soldiers come for us?” Gemma asked.

“Oh, they won’t be able to break inside,” Stil grinned. “Every scrap of my camp is charmed. They won’t see our quarters. They’ll just see a cloth tent and move on. It works a little like the silk bag.”

“So that’s what you meant when you said you could hide me in comfort.”

“Exactly. The trip there will be difficult in the darkness and falling snow, but once we reach camp, we consider can ourselves fortified and slowly make our way south. Any questions?”

“No.”

“Objections?”

“Are you sure you want to do this with me?” Gemma asked.

“I’m certain,” Stil said, giving Gemma a soft smile. “We have a few hours before we should leave. I suggest you get some rest. I’ll see to the spinning.”

Gemma shifted, uncomfortable with leaving the mage to do just about everything.

“If you aren’t feeling sleepy, we could always play the question game,” Stil teasingly added.

“I will sleep,” Gemma said, walking off. She paused midstride to turn around and add, “Thank you, Stil.”

Stil inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Gemma took the silk bag and her cape and chose a flax pile far away from the spinning wheel to nestle into. She didn’t think she could sleep even if she wanted to, but as she watched Stil wet more flax, her eyes slowly shut, and she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 12

“Gemma,” Stil said, gently nudging her.

“Hm,” Gemma said, rubbing her crusty eyes.

“It’s time.”

Gemma woke up quickly, her eyes wide as she tried to place where she was. “We can leave?”

Stil nodded. “Yes. Do you still have the heat charm?”

“Yes,” Gemma said, struggling out of the flax pile in which she was nestled.

Stil had done a heroic job of spinning the flax. Gemma’s flax pile was one of only two full stacks left—although there had been packets of fibers spread throughout the room.

“Keep it—slip it in your mittens,” Stil said, tossing Gemma the mittens Lady Linnea had given her.

Gemma untangled the threaded charm from her neck and slipped it in her mitten—along with the thimble she had yet to use. She finished fastening her cloak, picked up her silk bag, and met Stil by the door.

She took one last glance of the sorrowful tower, taking in the impressive spindle of gold thread.

“Ready?” Stil asked. In his hand, he held some sort of glowing prism.

“Yes,” Gemma said. She was sorry she couldn’t send word to Lady Linnea and Grandmother Guri, but they would understand.

“Here we go,” Stil said, flipping his shabby hood up.

Gemma didn’t see what Stil did to open the door—he blocked her view with his body—but the door clanked, and the wind sucked it open, nearly tearing it off its hinges.

The snow had stopped playing around and was pelting the ground, covering it in a layer of white as tall as the length of Gemma’s hand.

“So you really love this *beautiful* country, huh?” Stil shouted over the howling gusts. He struggled against the wind to close the door when Gemma followed him out.

“You’ll see in the morning,” Gemma shouted, snowflakes stinging her cheeks. She had to pull her cape against her to keep it from streaming straight behind her.

The wind howled like a ravenous wolf as Stil led Gemma east—away from Lake Sno and behind the royal palace. They moved at a staggering walk, which was an uncomfortably slow pace for a person fleeing for her life. Gemma tried to walk quickly, but the wind pulled on her clothes and tossed her like she was a corn husk.

"At least we need not worry about our tracks," Stil said, turning to look behind them. By the light of the prism, Gemma could see that any footprints they made were almost instantly erased by the whirling wind and snow.

Gemma squinted up at Stil and didn't reply, fighting to keep her balance.

"It will get better when we leave Ostfold behind," Stil said, gesturing to the sleeping city. "The woods are more sheltered."

They passed the palace and walked south, through empty farm fields, moving parallel to the capital.

It wasn't until they staggered through the farmland surrounding Ostfold that they were able to slip into a dark forest.

Stil was right: the wind was partially blocked by the great trees, but the same trees cast sinister shadows and groaned ominously as Stil and Gemma walked past—moving briskly.

"Did you hear that?" Gemma asked, looking behind. Her heart beat faster ever since they left the tower, but at the sound of a howl, it stopped all together.

"It's the trees. No one at the palace has discovered your disappearance. They won't be up for a few hours. Come on," Stil said, tugging Gemma forward by the hand and holding his prism light out.

They walked through the dark forest and the occasional blustery meadow for what felt like hours.

Gemma's face was numb, and her feet were blocks of ice—in spite of the heat charm—when they stumbled out of the dark forest and into a field.

The sun was up. Dawn hadn't reached them in the forest, but in the field, the pink horizon made the snow smoothed across the ground glow and sparkle like fine fabric.

The howling wind was gone, replaced by a playful breeze that kicked up bits of snow and made the flakes glitter. Fir trees, pines, and bare oaks

shielded the meadow, bringing in spots of green and brown. Birds sang and perched on a sorry-looking tent and a sleepy donkey.

"This is it," Stil said. "My camp."

"I see," Gemma said, her voice monotone.

The tent—which was tattered and looked like it was on the verge of collapsing—was tucked behind a bare campfire that had no wood to stock it.

Gemma hoped the tent was, as Stil had promised, like her silk bag and had hidden depths, or she would march off alone—danger or not.

The donkey was picketed to the ground. His fuzzy coat was puffed, making him resemble a yak more than an equine. He was big for a donkey—the size of a small horse—and when he caught sight of Gemma and Stil, he brayed and stamped his hooves.

"That's Pricker Patch," Stil said. "Be careful with him. He nearly bit my arm off once when I told him he looked ridiculous."

Gemma tilted her head to study the donkey as they drew closer. "He looks sensible."

Stil snorted, sweeping snow away from the tent with his cloak. "Sensibly ferocious. I keep him to guard the camp and carry things, not for company. This way. Let's get out of the cold," Stil said, lifting the tent flap. The inside was the same as the outside—ratty and worn. Stil frowned and let the tent flap fall back into place.

"Is the inside of the tent magically heated?" Gemma asked as Stil opened the tent again—revealing the same thread-bare innards.

"What? No. A normal fire does the job," Stil said, closing the tent flap. He cleared his throat. "I'm home, you finicky thing. Stop playing games and open up," he said before smacking a side of the tent.

Gemma winced, fearing it would collapse under the abuse, but when Stil lifted the tent flap, it opened up into a large parlor. It contained a marble fireplace with a cheerfully crackling fire, two padded settees, two arm chairs, piles of cushions, and a short table not more than two feet high that held a silver tea set.

"Sorry, someone must have been creeping around here—it was guarding itself. We can check Pricker Patch's teeth later to find out if he ate the intruder," Stil said, stepping aside so Gemma could enter first.

Gemma hesitantly crawled through the narrow opening, into the elegant room. She winced when she set her snow covered feet on the

immense, red, patterned rug that covered the ground.

Stil's tastes were perfectly expressed by the room.

The wood on the settees and the armchairs, as well as the legs of the table, were ornately carved and stained such a deep, rich brown-red color they glowed. The walls were some sort of plaster, but there were moldings where it met the plaster ceiling and the wooden floor.

Gold candlesticks, welded to resemble unfurling vines and flowers, were bolted to wall. They held bee's wax candles that scented the air with sweet honey.

Gold-leafed instruments, a tapestry, and paintings hung from the wall. Even the frames were of the highest quality.

As Gemma looked around the room with big eyes, she realized Stil hadn't been thoughtlessly bemoaning the loss of great craftsmanship. And he was obviously an extremely talented, well-paid craftmage.

"Home at last," Stil said, thoughtlessly trekking snow across his costly carpet and dumping his cloak and belongings on one of the fine settees. "What's wrong?" he asked Gemma as he kicked off his boots.

Gemma gripped her borrowed silk bag that held the wool cape she was making for the craftmage. "Nothing," she said. "It's beautiful."

Stil smiled as he combed his silky black hair with his fingers. "Thank you. With my vocation, you think I would be sick of looking at crafted goods and merchandise, but I've learned it's important to stock my place with the best. It feeds my soul," he said, groaning when he stretched his arms above his head. "You must be an ice block. Come. You'll want to use the bath, I assume," Stil said, leading the way through a great door.

"The what?" Gemma asked, carefully shedding her footwear and cloak at the door before trailing after Stil. She stopped at the threshold of the room the craftmage had entered.

The bathroom was just as beautiful and over-the-top as the parlor.

The bathtub was immense. Gemma suspected Pricker Patch—if he could be goaded into going down on his knees—could comfortably bathe in it. There were gold, brocade curtains that could be pulled around the tub for privacy, a *chandelier*, several gold-framed mirrors, a well-padded arm chair, and two white vanities accented with gold.

An iron grid was built above a fire. The grid was laden with rocks, which the flickering flames licked, heating the rocks.

“Spend as long as you want,” Stil said, pulling a rope. To Gemma’s astonishment, part of the ceiling pulled down, and water rushed from it, filling the tub. “I have business I must attend to in the rest of the house. When you’re finished, go back to the parlor—there will be tea and refreshments waiting for you,” Stil said, releasing the rope—cutting off the water—and using a pair of tongs to remove stones from the fire. He dropped them into the tub—making steam hiss whenever a rock hit the water.

“I’ll find something for you to wear—you must be sick of your uniform by now—and leave it by the door, but here is a robe and towels. Explore. Use anything you want here. I don’t know what I have, sorry,” Stil said.

“Thank you,” Gemma said.

Stil smiled and pushed Gemma’s hair-band—which had fallen low over her eyebrows—up with two fingers. “Of course. I will leave you to it. You look dead on your feet. Enjoy,” he said, leaving the room with a flourish.

Gemma hesitatingly made use of the bathroom. She felt far too self-conscious to do more than cast a wondering eye at the various bottles, bath salts, perfumes, creams, and scrubs lined up on one of the vanities.

The bathwater was warm and restored feeling to Gemma’s numb fingers and toes. It was a delight to wash off the bits of dungeon grime she had been wearing for the past few weeks, but she moved quickly, feeling like an intruder in a lady’s private powder room.

Gemma cautiously poked her head into the parlor to find Stil had kept his promise. Waiting for her was a pair of black buckle shoes, black stockings, and a dress that was beautiful enough to pass off as Verglas wedding clothes for a civilian like Gemma.

The skirt was black wool with a high waist and a ribbon for a belt. The edge of the skirt and the ribbon belt had pink and green floral designs. The ribbon belt covered the hem between the dress, and a black vest that had similar embroidery on it. Black string looped around gold buttons and criss-crossed the front of the vest. A white, linen shirt that had the same embroidery on the cuffs and collar was set out to go under the vest, completing the look.

Gemma searched the bathroom for a much less expensive gown to wear—something more appropriate of her station. Finding no alternative,

she reluctantly put on the dress and crept into the parlor.

Stil was there, taking inventory of a number of jeweled items spread out on the low table. His hair was damp—signaling he too had taken a bath of some sort—and was much, much *shorter*. It was slicked back out of his face, with the exception of a few tendrils that hung over his forehead, and was closely cropped to his head in an almost military style.

His clothing style was—once again—unlike anything Gemma had ever seen before. He had knee-high brown boots that had elaborate, royal blue embroidery on the heel and toe. He wore black breeches—but the inner caves and leg were colored royal blue, and a dove-gray jacket that cut off at the knees was strapped into place by a giant leather belt that encircled his torso. The jacket was decorated with blue embroidery on the cuffs and lapels that matched the embroidery on his boots.

"There you are," Stil said, smiling when his blue eyes landed on Gemma. "I was wondering if I picked the wrong size clothes for you. But you look just as beautiful in it as I thought you would. What would you like to do first: see your room or enjoy some refreshments?"

Gemma briefly considered saying something about his hair as she stared at it before she brushed the thought away. "I think I would like to see my room," Gemma said, holding up her silk bag.

"Of course. This way," Stil said, going through a different door. He led Gemma down a hallway that was dotted with doors. When they reached the end, he opened a room.

Gemma peeked inside before she backed up. "No."

"No, what?" Stil asked.

"I can't stay here," Gemma said, gesturing to the room.

"Why not? Is it not fine enough?"

"It's *too* fine."

Stil gave Gemma an amused smirk. "I don't think I have ever heard a lady complain that something is too fine."

"You still have yet to, for I am not a titled lady," Gemma reminded him. "Do you have a less decorous room?"

"It does not matter if I do. This is my camp, and it is for me to decide where you will stay."

Gemma ventured another peek in the room. "You cannot be serious."

"It's your room. I will carve your name into the door if you do not believe me," Stil said.

Gemma mulishly tucked her head.

"You will not win this one, Gemma Kielland. This is your room. Return to the parlor when you have finished putting your things away," Stil said, sauntering back down the hallway.

Gemma watched the craftmage go with a scowl before she returned her attention to the room. The walls were a pale blue, like snow in the evening light. The floor was wood stained the color of a rich, dark honey, but there was a beautiful, elaborately woven rug spread on the ground. The furniture—the bed frame, vanity, armoire, and nightstand—were all a beautiful, medium shade of wood decorated with dark colored, carved swirls. The air was fragrant with the smell of pine, and the slightest hint of mint. Gemma didn't know if it was from the furniture or a hidden nosegay, but the scent was welcoming.

Gemma had seen Lady Linnea's bedroom before. This room easily rivaled it.

"No," Gemma said, moving down the hallway. She tried turning door knobs, but none of them budged. Gemma rummaged in her silk bag before pulling out the needles Grandmother Guri had sent. She tried using the dullest needle to pick a lock, but the door shook and boomed like thunder, discouraging Gemma from trying again.

After five minutes of wandering, Gemma was forced to admit defeat. She returned to the bedroom and unpacked her things, setting them out on the beautiful vanity table.

She dragged her feet as she wandered back to the parlor.

Something wasn't sitting right with her. It was the environment, and the way Stil was acting—like she was a dear companion he wanted to comfortably house instead of a vagrant on which he was taking pity.

Magic users do not befriend civilians. They aid us, yes, but only to address whatever our common problem is before they set us on our way. They do not invite civilians into their homes, dress them, and give them such a room. Perhaps they would do something like that for royalty, or heroes on a quest, but for a poor seamstress?

Gemma paused outside the parlor door. *Why is Stil doing all of this? Why is his kindness going so far*?

"I hope you found the room to your satisfaction?" Stil said when Gemma entered the parlor.

Gemma glared at Stil.

“I thought it would suit your tastes—stop giving me that look. I have tea and food,” Stil said, patting the spot next to him on the settee.

Gemma inspected the food piled on the platters before she took a plate and loaded it with sausages, salted pork, fresh bread, and apple slices, avoiding most of the delicious-smelling but foreign-looking meat pies and pastries.

Gemma sat on the empty settee across from Stil, making the craftmage shake his head in amusement.

“So my plan is for us to spend the day and night here—we won’t be found by any soldiers King Torgen sends after us as long as we are inside. No normal civilian could break through my security measures. Tomorrow we will start our journey, moving south towards the Loire border. Is that acceptable?” Stil asked.

“Yes,” Gemma said, eating her food with relish.

“As we will be walking, I assume it will take us some time to get to the border, but I do not think it is necessary to rush. The bigger trick will be remaining unseen as we travel,” Stil said, serving Gemma a cup of tea.

“Thank you. That light you were using last night, what was it?” Gemma asked.

“The starfire?” Stil said, slipping a glass prism out of his pocket.

Gemma nodded.

“The name is a little fancy considering how easy it is to make these. It’s one of the first skills you learn as a craftmage. It’s a bit of magic light trapped in a prism. It will shine brighter or dimmer based on your orders. Their only real purpose is to shed light.”

“It seems to be very useful,” Gemma said, eyeing the prism.

“It can be, but they aren’t very practical for everyday use. Even mages still need fire to truly light a room. Starfires are best used for temporary cases, or in cases of bad weather, as they can’t be put out. Most often, we make them for children who are frightened of the dark,” Stil said. He was silent for a moment. “Would you like one?”

“How expensive are they?” Gemma asked.

Stil chuckled. “I fear I have made you wary of any gifts from me forever. There is no charge. Making a starfire can be done in a matter of minutes. As I’m giving you a finished product and not performing magic for you, no trade is necessary.”

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely. I have a wooden crate of them in my shop leftover from my apprentice days. I will take you back there, and you can have as many as you can carry,” Stil promised.

Gemma ate an apple slice and mulled over Stil’s offer. *It seems to me that he didn’t need to perform specific magic for the thimble either, and he still requested a payment for that.*

“Thank you,” Gemma said, deciding to take the risk and accept his offer. She was silent until she finished her meal, in which she excused herself to her room.

After casting a critical eye on her surroundings and then turning the same critical eye on the black, wool cape, Gemma set her unease aside and embroidered the cloak for the remainder of the day, until she fell asleep early that night.

It took every ounce of Lady Linnea’s will to remain seated at the table as her mother droned on over breakfast.

“—will sadly have to find a new seamstress to replace Gemma, although it will be difficult to find anyone as talented as she was.”

“Is,” Linnea said.

“Pardon, darling? What did you say?” Lady Lovland said.

“Gemma *is* talented. She is still alive,” Lady Linnea said, her usual mask of indifference pasted on her face.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Lady Lovland hesitantly agreed. “In any case, I have asked your father to send word to our Loire friends and associates. A Loire seamstress would do quite well with you, I am certain.”

“May I be excused?” Lady Linnea said.

“But, darling, you’ve hardly eaten any breakfast at all,” Lady Lovland said.

“I feel ill,” Lady Linnea lied. Nothing could be farther from the truth. She couldn’t eat because she could barely contain her joy!

“I see, poor dear. Yes, you may return to your rooms. I will send a maid with tea to you in a bit to see if you can eat something then,” Lady Lovland said.

Lady Linnea curtseyed to her mother and swept out of the room, the skirts of her elegant dress—designed and sewn by Gemma—sweeping the floor.

When the door closed behind her, Lady Linnea burst forth in an impatient march. A scullery maid—Sissel—bobbed a curtsey before she handed a shawl to her and whispered, “Out the eastern side door, My Lady.”

“Thank you,” Lady Linnea said. She wrapped the shawl around her shoulders before hurrying to the eastern side door.

The back gardens were empty—except for snow-covered hedges—so Lady Linnea tucked the shawl over her head and trotted in the direction of the stables.

A young stable boy—wearing a coat made by Gemma—stood in the stable entrance, kicking up his heels.

“He’s back by Captain’s stall, My Lady,” the stable boy said, naming one of the farm horses.

Learning from Gemma, Lady Linnea tossed the boy a pastry she smuggled out of breakfast. “Good lad,” she said before slipping in the stables, leaving the boy to keep watch.

Lady Linnea ran down the aisle, frightening horses in her wake. “She escaped?” she asked, throwing herself over the top of Captain’s stall.

The large draft horse didn’t react at all and kept chewing his hay, but Prince Toril popped out from behind him.

“She escaped,” he confirmed, exiting the stall. “Like a ghost in the night. She talked my father into removing her guard. He stubbornly watched for the first few hours, but sometime in the early morning, she gave him the slip. She still managed to spin a great deal of the flax, too.”

“Toril, this is marvelous!” Lady Linnea said, throwing herself at the prince to hug him tightly. “Thank you, thank you, *thank you*!”

“I-I didn’t do anything,” the prince stammered around the same time that Lady Linnea realized she was hugging a boy and not Gemma, a horse, or her parents. The prince’s body was much *stronger* and, oddly enough, was as comforting as hugging a large dog.

Still, it felt foreign and…different.

Lady Linnea hastily backed off and brushed her dress off, trying to restore some of her equilibrium. “But you did help us,” she argued, inspecting her shoes for a moment so she wouldn’t have to meet Prince Toril’s eyes. “You have helped us since the start of this nightmare. I cannot thank you enough,” she said.

“It’s not over yet,” Prince Toril grimly said.

Lady Linnea almost bit her tongue when she hastily brought her chin up. “What do you mean?”

“Your maid—”

“She is my seamstress.”

“Yes, well, she won’t be safe until she’s across the Verglas border. My father is sending out a small army of soldiers after her,” Prince Toril said.

“She will make it,” Lady Linnea said. “Unless something happens, and she feels she has no choice but to give herself up, Gemma will wriggle out of Verglas.”

“You sound so certain,” Prince Toril said.

“Someone is helping her—someone who cares for her *very* much. I don’t think they will allow her to be captured. Which reminds me…are any male servants, guards, or soldiers missing from the palace?” Lady Linnea asked.

Prince Toril blinked. “Missing? No. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Lady Linnea said before smiling again. “I’m so happy I could scream,” she said. When she threw her hands in the air, a carriage horse across the aisle spooked.

“So, you think this mission is over?” Prince Toril asked, scuffing the toe of his boot on the dirt floor.

“Yes,” Lady Linnea said, her smile mixed with joy and sadness. She would miss Gemma like she would miss her right hand or favorite sword, and although the past few weeks were dangerous, they were also thrilling compared to her normal, boring life. And if she was being completely honest, she would miss the secretive meetings with the prince.

Prince Toril lifted his gaze so he looked above Lady Linnea’s head. “Although it is over…would you care to continue our acquaintance?”

Lady Linnea adjusted her grip on her shawl. “What do you mean?”

“I mean…could we still arrange to meet?” the prince asked, his words going up an octave, as if he was afraid of her answer.

Lady Linnea studied the bashful prince before nodding. “I would enjoy that,” she said.

Prince Toril relaxed, dropping his hunched shoulders. “I’m glad,” he said with a painfully genuine/puppy smile that made Lady Linnea want to throw something at him in embarrassment.

“Yes,” Lady Linnea said, pressing her lips together.

The pair stood in the stable for several awkward moments before the stable boy interrupted them. “My Lady? It looks like your father is coming to see his horse.”

“I should leave,” Lady Linnea awkwardly said.

Prince Toril nodded. “Of course. I will see you…tomorrow?”

“Yes. Until tomorrow,” Lady Linnea agreed, wrapping her shawl around her head again. She scurried out a door on one side of the stable while Prince Toril scurried out of the door directly opposite. Both of them managed to miss Lady Linnea’s father as he greeted the stable boy at the entrance.

“How are the horses?” Lord Lovland asked.

“Quite well, sir. Aerie is back on her grain,” the stable boy said, luring Lord Lovland into the stable.

When the two of them had left the entryway, Lady Linnea hurried past the gardens, heading for the house. When someone released a sharp, piercing whistle, Lady Linnea turned around. Prince Toril stood at the border of their lands. He waved, and didn’t slip into the street until Lady Linnea returned the gesture.

Lady Linnea smiled as she returned to the house. *Yes, I will miss Gemma terribly. But maybe this won’t be so bad.*

Chapter 13

Traveling with Stil was an interesting experience, less because he was a mage and more because of his relationship with his donkey, Pricker Patch.

Pricker Patch was a stoic animal. He did not like to move more than necessary, but when he was finally coaxed to walk, Gemma had to trot to keep up. Pricker Patch set the pace for the day, and when Pricker Patch stopped, Gemma and Stil stopped, for the donkey could not be pushed, urged, coaxed, or bribed into taking another step. Usually the animal was willing to go for most of the day, so on the third day of their travels, when Pricker Patch stopped mid-morning at the edge of the forest—just as they were about to leave the protection of the trees—and would continue no farther, Gemma thought it was odd.

"Does he normally do this?" Gemma asked, studying the displeased donkey.

"Sometimes, but not usually without a purpose," Stil said. He ran his hands down the donkey's legs and inspected his hooves.

"Hmm," Gemma said, leaning against a tree to look out at the ambling, open field. The field was at least a mile long before it plunged back into a small copse of trees. "…Stil," Gemma said, shielding her eyes from the bright sun and squinting.

"What?" Stil asked, rubbing one of Pricker Patch's ears.

"Do you see that?" Gemma asked, pointing at the shapes moving at the perimeter of the field.

Stil looked where Gemma was pointing before slipping a tube from his belt and flicking it open into a beautiful and ornate spyglass. "Soldiers," he said, passing the spyglass to Gemma so she could see as well.

When Gemma held it to her right eye, it brought the shapes into focus, revealing uniforms and weapons.

Stil scratched his head in aggravation. "I didn't think they would come this way. I assumed they would think we would follow a river south. That will teach me to skimp on charms and spells," he said before pulling on Pricker Patch's halter and changing directions.

"What do we do?" Gemma asked.

“We change directions and head farther east. I have no idea how they got farther south of us, but we should be able to circle around them. Tomorrow, I’ll set some spells and charms up before we travel,” Stil said, leading the way.

Pricker Patch surprisingly accepted the change and started walking again.

Gemma glanced back at the soldiers before she hurried to carry the spyglass to Stil as they continued their journey, safely screened by the trees.

Several days later—this time late in the afternoon—Pricker Patch decided they had traveled far enough. As there was still an hour or two of sunlight left, Stil tried to persuade the donkey to continue, but in a fit of anger Pricker Patch (moving with a surprising amount of swiftness), grabbed an edge of Stil’s cloak, and yanked it, badly ripping the fabric.

“This…,” Stil darkly trailed off and glared at his donkey. “How am I supposed to fix this?” he asked an unrepentant Pricker Patch, shaking his cloak in front of the animal. “It’s already falling to pieces! If it rips much more, I’m going to start losing some of the spells and charms fixed in it.”

“Can’t you buy a new one?” Gemma asked, working to undo the buckles and ties that held the tent poles and material on the donkey’s back.

“Not easily,” Stil frowned, studying the tear. “It’s blasted hard to get a tailor talented enough to make a clothing item in which I can invest a large amount of spells—like this cloak. I bought it from a Ringsted tailor when I first made apprentice—I should have bought *ten* of them, for I haven’t found another tailor as skilled since. Wretched creature,” Still said, narrowing his eyes at the donkey.

Gemma patted Pricker Patch’s neck.

“Don’t comfort him; he doesn’t deserve it,” Stil said, flipping his hair over his shoulder. (It was long again, today. Gemma had no idea how he did it, but Stil changed hair styles—and lengths—at least once a day. He seemed to expect her to comment on it, so naturally she did not.)

“I doubt it comforts him. I think he dislikes human touch,” Gemma dryly said, stepping back to slide the tent poles off the donkey.

“Perhaps normal humans, but he clearly likes you.”

“What? How can you tell?”

“He looks very happy,” Stil said.

Gemma stared at the donkey.

Pricker Patch looked just as cantankerous and stoic as he had since she first set eyes on him.

“I don’t see it,” Gemma said.

“He’s thrilled. He’s merely skilled at hiding it,” Stil said.

“I see,” Gemma said as she finished unpacking the tent.

Stil finished mourning his cloak and moved between Gemma and the tent. “I’ll set it up.”

Gemma mutely backed up and patted Pricker Patch as she squinted at the horizon. “I am surprised we haven’t seen the soldiers, again.”

“I have a misdirection spell active, as well as a screening charm. King Torgen’s men would be hard-pressed to find us. And given your unusual relationship with your guards, I imagine they are not strenuously searching you out.”

“Maybe,” Gemma agreed. When she turned to study Stil she noticed that his cloak—normally a stark black—seemed to…*swirl*. There were faint swirls of blue, purple, green, and even reds that crawled across his cloak as if it were rolling like an ocean. “I think I finally see the magic in your cloak.”

Stil looked up. “What?” he said before glancing at his cape. He breathed an oath and dropped a tent pole. “It’s leaking magic.”

“Hm?”

“That demon donkey you’re petting damaged the cloak so much it can’t retain the spells anymore, and they’re dripping out,” Stil said, redoubling his efforts to get the tent up.

“Would you picket Pricker Patch? I’ve got to see if I can repair the damage and stop the leak,” Stil said when the tent was almost set up.

“Yes,” Gemma said.

“Thank you,” Stil said before disappearing though the tent flap.

Pricker Patch gave one loud bray, as if sensing his triumph.

Gemma picketed the donkey, tying his rope to one of the tent pegs. She entered the tent and made her way through the parlor to the hallway of doors. She found the small storage room Stil had shown her on their first day of traveling, where grain, carrots, apples, and hay was stored for Pricker Patch. She struggled to carry the hay through the parlor (wincing whenever flecks of alfalfa and strands of grass dropped) and threw the hay

in front of the donkey. She gave the stubborn creature a carrot, and when she returned to the parlor, all traces of hay were gone.

Gemma shrugged off her new cloak—one made in a style similar to Stil's but in dark green—and made her way to her uncomfortably beautiful bedroom.

She pulled out the black wool cape and studied it with narrowed eyes. The cloak, to Gemma's critical gaze, was well made. The midnight-blue silk lining was perfectly joined to the black cloak with stitching so tiny and straight, it was perfect. The embroidery—vine-work with the occasional leaf, all made with silver-colored thread—glowed on the dark backdrop, circling the shoulders in liquid lines.

The only work left on it was to finish one embroidered leaf. But even though Gemma had used every bit of skill she had on the item and could detect no imperfection, she doubted it would meet Stil's standards.

"Perhaps it could hold him over, until he finds a new cloak," Gemma said, threading her needle to finish the final leaf. Her stomach growled with hunger when she finally put her needle down and trimmed away the last bit of unnecessary thread. She studied the cloak and sighed. "I feel like a fool. Like a peasant offering a king a chicken," she said before folding up the cloak and draping it over her arm.

On a hunch, she made her way to the parlor and peered inside. Stil was there, stretched out on a settee. His mouth and chin were visible, but his eyes and forehead were tucked under a pillow.

"I would say we should slay the donkey and eat him for dinner, but I suspect leather would be more palatable," Stil said.

"The damage is that bad?" Gemma asked.

"It's worse than I would like when I am in an already uncomfortable situation," Stil sighed, sitting upright. He gave Gemma a tired smile, tilting his head in interest when he noticed she carried something.

Gemma nodded and furrowed her forehead. She took a moment to rally her courage before she said, "I have something for you."

"Oh?"

Gemma wordlessly passed the cloak to the mage.

Stil took the bundle of cloth and unfurled it. His eyes traced the embroidery, and he nudged the inner lining, examining the stitching and the hemming.

“I made it,” Gemma said, for the first time in her life uncomfortable with heavy silence.

“You *made* this?” Stil asked, briefly pulling his eyes from the cloak.

Gemma nodded. “I apologize if it is not up to your usual standards, but perhaps it could serve as a temporary substitute.”

“Substitute?” Stil laughed. “Gemma this is—it’s incredible. It’s *perfect*. You really made it?”

“Yes.”

“How old are you?”

“*Excuse me*?”

Stil shook his head. “You cannot fathom how *rare* it is to find something this well made, this *perfect*. You must have some magic in your blood.”

“I do not,” Gemma said. “Sewing is not magic.”

“Yours practically is. Any kind of craftsmanship has touches of magic—that’s why items can hold magic. But this cloak, Gemma—you must be a genius.”

“Hardly,” Gemma wryly said.

“You think I’m storying you, but I’m serious. It takes great talent and a masterful mind to create something like this, something that practically *begs* to have magic added to it,” Stil said. “Doesn’t it kill you to give up your creations?”

“No. I sew for other people, not myself. That is the way it has always been,” Gemma said.

“I wonder if it has to do with that blasted sense of sacrifice you have. You sew for other people—*hah*!” Stil said, shaking his head. “I will have to introduce you to my fellow craftmages. They will love you, and you will never have to worry again about money. You practically *can* spin straw into gold—that is, you can make an item normally useless into a priceless treasure,” Stil snorted.

Gemma shrugged, not quite believing his praise.

“Thank you, Gemma. You have given me something so valuable it cannot be fathomed,” Stil said, dragging his eyes from the cloak.

“Thank you for all your help…and for using your magic on my behalf,” Gemma said.

Stil’s eyes glowed as a soft, tender smile stole across his lips. He crossed the room to stand in front of her. He slid an arm around her,

scooping her against her chest, and he lowered his face—his lips, more correctly—towards her.

Gemma came to a realization. Stil quite possibly found her attractive.

The incoming kiss told Gemma he might actually find her more than attractive; he perhaps even liked her, or fancied her.

She immediately rejected the idea.

It was preposterous. Magic users never fell in love with civilians. There was the occasional heart-breaking love story, where a mage or enchanter fell in love with a princess or some such nonsense, but they were *rare*.

No. Magic users loved other magic users. It was the rule.

Gemma, paralyzed where she stood, waited for Stil to back off to declare it all a joke.

When he was so close, she could feel his breath on her lips, Gemma exploded backwards.

"No," she said, shaking a finger at Stil as if he were a miscreant dog.

"What?" Stil asked, tilting his head.

"Whatever you're doing, NO."

Stil tilted his head in the other direction. "What do you think I'm doing?" he asked, taking a step towards Gemma.

Gemma rushed to put the settee in between them. "You," she said, "are…I don't know."

"I think you do know."

"No, I don't," Gemma said, shaken by the ordeal. Mages didn't go around almost kissing people. It just wasn't done. *Wars* could be started that way!

"You are a smart girl. Try to figure it out. I think you will find there is one easy conclusion."

"Except that conclusion is *impossible*," Gemma squeaked, scared out of her usual indifference when Stil stepped around the settee. Gemma circled it to keep it between herself and the mage.

"Why is it so impossible that I should love you—,"

"NO!" Gemma shouted.

"Oh, come now. You can't really think I am doing this because I'm a flirt," Stil chuckled before he lunged around the settee.

Frightened by the throaty noise, Gemma fled to the far side of the room, scampering behind the second settee. "Mages don't fall in love with

normal people!”

“In your defense, you are not normal,” Stil said, strolling across the parlor.

“You…are,” Gemma struggled for a moment. “Blinded by your, ah, inaccessibility to other mages. What you’re feeling isn’t real.”

“Gemma.”

Gemma was starting to get a better hold on herself and was able to bring down the octave of her voice. “I thought you were acting oddly. The fine clothes and the bedroom, accompanying me to the border instead of sending me on my way like any proper storybook magician. Clearly, you are under some sort of mental strain,” Gemma said, faking out Stil to make him circle around the settee again, leaving her to flee in the opposite direction.

When she was safe on the other side of the settee, she smoothed her dress and lifted her chin. “Love affairs between mages and seamstresses just aren’t done,” she finished primly before leaping out of the way when Stil tried to pounce on her.

“Gemma.”

“What?”

“Why else do you think I demanded your firstborn child as a payment for spinning?” Stil said, carefully enunciating the words.

Gemma blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“If I didn’t love you, why would I want your firstborn?”

“To be a house-servant? I don’t know! Magic folk are *all* eccentric. We did establish that I don’t want children, so it hardly matters,” Gemma said.

“It matters because my required payment means if you ever change your mind, *I* will be your child’s father.”

Gemma screwed up her face. “You are the most ridiculous mage—,” her words died on her lips as she recalled Stil’s odd wording. She hadn’t paid much attention—mostly because she didn’t particularly *want* children, and the idea of getting married was so far off and unlikely after all she went through it wasn’t like it mattered.

But the *wording*. He had said, “Your firstborn child will be *mine*.”

Gemma narrowed her eyes. “You,” she growled.

Stil’s eyebrows popped up. “So, now you’re mad?”

“Of COURSE I’m mad, you sneaky, conniving, mage!” Gemma said, whipping a pillow at the craftmage.

“I must say I pictured many reactions when I confessed my love to you. Rage was not one of them,” Stil said, ducking the pillow.

“How could you do this!?”

“Why are we shouting?”

“I DON’T KNOW!”

There was a creak, and Stil and Gemma turned to face the front door.

A woman stood in the doorway. The most beautiful woman in the world, in fact. Stil was handsome, but this woman had such great beauty it made Gemma’s soul hurt just to look at her.

The woman wore an opalescent dress that was in the process of changing from a shade of pale green to a pale blue. “I seem to have caught you at a bad time,” she said in a voice that was so lovely it was breathtaking. “I’ll just go for now.”

“Come back in an hour,” Stil said.

“Wait!” Gemma called, instantly recognizing the woman for who she must be—a magic user. Gemma rushed across the parlor. “You must be here to see Stil. I apologize for our loud discussion, but you have not interrupted anything. Please, come in. Can I get you something to drink?” Gemma asked, angling to get out of the room and as far away from Stil as possible.

To her shock, the beautiful woman stared at her for a moment before bursting into tears—still looking breathtaking and gorgeous as tears spilled down her cheeks.

Gemma helplessly looked to Stil, who hurried forward, his forehead creased with worry. He slid an arm around the beautiful woman’s back to guide her to a settee. When she was seated, he crouched in front of her. “Angelique, what’s wrong?”

Chapter 14

Gemma carefully carried a full tea tray down the hallway, pausing when she reached the parlor door. It was cracked, and she could hear the conversation taking place inside.

"I *hate* crying," the beautiful woman—Stil had called her Angelique—sniffed. "It's so useless, and it only serves to make a person damp and weary," she said before crying again.

"I'm certain that after all you've gone through, and after all you've done, you deserve a good cry," Stil said, his voice soft. The craftmage was silent as the beautiful woman cried harder. It wasn't the gentle sniff she made with her beautiful tears earlier. It was the sound of a person's heart breaking.

"I can't find him, Stil," Angelique cried. "I have looked everywhere and combed every country, and I haven't found a hint of him! I even forced my way to Ringsted to see if he was carried down there. Nothing."

"You'll find him."

"No, I won't! I haven't any place left to look! I have tracked him with magic; I have looked for him in enchanted mirrors; and I have even tried to use our bond as master and apprentice. Nothing works! He might be—,"

Dead.

Although the beautiful magic user couldn't bring herself to say it, even Gemma could feel the word hanging in the air.

"I hate to mention this, but it must be connected to the evil and darkness that has been stirring across the continent," Stil said. "The attacks against the countries and royalty are too well done to be coincidence. Whoever is responsible for this has been planning it for years. It is very likely they knew Enchanter Evariste needed to be removed before they could launch their first attack."

"They seem to be doing a fine job of sabotaging themselves," Angelique said, her voice growing stronger as her tears stopped. "Every blasted country I run into has someone cursed—a curse which can be broken by *true love*."

Judging by the scornful tone of Angelique's voice, the subject was a safe one to intrude upon, so Gemma nudged the door open wider and

carried the tea tray into the parlor.

“I’m so sick of true love, the very thought makes me ill,” Angelique said. The beautiful lady was seated on a settee. Stil stood next to her, his arms folded across his chest.

“I know love is the most powerful, righteous emotion possible, but this is sheer folly,” Angelique continued. “The number of curses that have popped up in the past few years with love as the counter-agent is mind-boggling.”

“It does seem rather odd that such a wide-spread campaign to spread darkness would have such a specific, repeatable weakness,” Stil said, smiling at Gemma when she set the tea tray down. “One would think they would grow aware of this detail and change their arrangement.”

Gemma ignored him and served Angelique a cup of black tea.

“Why? Even if we manage to break the curses, I still wouldn’t say we are winning,” Angelique dully said. She shook her head and remembered her manners. “Thank you,” she said to Gemma with a serene smile, taking the teacup and saucer.

“Aye. There are plenty of predicaments that have yet to be addressed,” Stil said. “The Sole Princess, the Princesses of Farset, someone must take care of Kozlovka, and so on.”

Gemma moved to slip out of the parlor, but before she could leave the tea tray behind, Stil caught her wrist and anchored her to the spot.

Gemma tried to discreetly pull, unwilling to ruin the conversation but eager to leave the delusional Stil. His grip was as malleable as iron.

“It gets worse,” Angelique sighed wearily. “Ringsted is plagued by a sea witch.”

“What?” Stil blinked, surprise and unease coloring his voice.

Angelique nodded. “The selkies are trying to take care of her, but the humans are proving to be more of a hindrance than a help,” she sighed and sipped her tea. “I ran into a selkie that was forcibly landed—some terrible man stole her pelt.”

“*What?*”

“She feared he would make her use her powers over water for ill and asked me to seal her voice. I didn’t want to take it forever, so I gave her the only escape contract I have learned to use.”

“True love?” Stil asked.

“As usual,” Angelique said with some bitterness to her voice. “I meant to stay and help her, but I needed to be in Sole for the Princess’s birthday, and I was forced to leave her. I meant to return to Ringsted with Blanche and Rein, but then I received word that you were in trouble,” Angelique said, offering Stil a smile. Her eyes flicked curiously to Gemma, and Stil moved.

“Ah, please forgive my terrible manners. Allow me to introduce you with great pleasure to Gemma Kielland, one of the most talented seamstresses in the continent. Gemma, this is Enchantress Angelique—one of the highest ranked magic users in the Veneno Conclave.”

“Good afternoon,” Gemma said, curtseying.

“I am charmed, Gemma,” Angelique said with a smile as caressing as silk. “Although, I fear Stil has mislead you: I am only an enchantress in training.”

Stil heaved a disgusted sigh worthy of Pricker Patch. “Everyone knows you have the capabilities. It’s is merely that with Enchanter Evariste… missing, he cannot bring you to the Conclave and declare you. You’re an enchantress, Angelique.”

Angelique delicately shook her head. “If I was ready to be an enchantress I would know more ways to counter curses besides using love,” she said. She watched Gemma try to pull her hand from Stil’s grasp without success. “I received your letter. You said you were being followed?” Angelique asked.

“Hunted, really,” Stil said. “By a hellhound and a rider mounted on a nightmare.”

Angelique’s teacup clicked when she set it down abruptly. “What? How can this be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand why, either,” Stil said. “But it’s why I fled to Verglas.”

“You were smart to do so,” Angelique said, knitting her fingers together as she thought. “Is the rider chasing you as well?” Angelique asked, looking to Gemma.

“No. Absolutely not,” Gemma said.

“Gemma is fleeing the country with me. She’s in a spot of trouble with King Torgen,” Stil said.

“Ah, him,” Angelique said knowingly.

“With all respect, Craftmage Stil, you were going to take me to the border, and then we were going to part ways,” Gemma said.

“Yes, but now we don’t have to. Angelique will take care of the rider for me, won’t you?” Stil said, turning to the beautiful enchantress.

Angelique sighed. “Sometimes you overestimate my capabilities.”

“No, I don’t. If your learned magic fails, you will just have to rely on your core magic. The rider is no match for *that*,” Stil said.

“Core magic?” Gemma asked, too curious to let the comment pass her.

“Enchanters are the highest rank of magic user there is,” Angelique said.

Gemma nodded.

“This is because we are able to use two types of magic: core magic and learned magic. Core magic is something all magic users have. It is what decides their focus. Stil’s core magic is craft related. Weather mages have weather core magic, and so on. All enchanters and enchantresses have core magic as well—although the kind and strength varies from enchanter to enchanter. It is our learned magic that gives us a higher rank. Learned magic—things like curse breaking, enchantments, working with elements, charms, general magic—are things only enchanters and enchantresses display the ability to learn.”

“For instance, no matter how hard I study, I can never control rain,” Stil said. “But Angelique—to a certain extent—can.”

“I see,” Gemma said.

“There are checks and balances of course,” Angelique said. “As an enchantress, I will never be as powerful in weather magic as a weather mage. And no enchanters are capable of infusing magic into weapons like Stil is—although that is to be expected as he is a genius in his core magic,” Angelique smiled.

The embarrassed smile Stil exposed made Gemma pause. She looked back and forth between Angelique and Stil as she realized, *Angelique is the person who taught him about the obligation to help those in need. She is the magic user that is precious to him.*

Gemma wryly lifted an eyebrow. *In love with me, indeed. Now that the original is here, there is no need to settle for a lesser, like me.*

“Enchanters and enchantresses generally have highly specialized types of core magic, too, and they are typically very powerful,” Stil added. “Angelique’s Master is considered to be one of the greatest magic users

since the Snow Queen. He was the youngest enchanter ever approved," Stil added. "But we are getting off topic. Angelique, I know you can destroy the rider with your core magic."

"Perhaps if I was approved to *use* my core magic. The Conclave still hasn't agreed to it," Angelique said. For Gemma's benefit she added, "My apprenticeship was and continues to be unusual because my core magic makes most…squeamish."

"I see," Gemma said, politely refraining from further questions.

"Regardless, I am certain I could drive the rider off for a time," Angelique said. "Although we will have to be careful. The forest is crawling with soldiers."

"Pardon?" Gemma said.

"They're King Torgen's men. At first I thought *they* were the followers you referred to in your letter, Stil. But now I suppose they are searching for you, Gemma?" Angelique asked.

Gemma shifted uncomfortably. "Yes," she said.

Angelique smiled. "Do not worry yourself over it. You are safe in Stil's home, and the border is but a short ride away."

"Is it? That's a relief," Stil said. "It feels like molasses runs faster than Pricker Patch is willing to move."

"Perhaps Pegasus can speak sense into him, although I fear he is growing to be just as ornery as your donkey," Angelique said. "The time away from Master Evariste has been hard on him."

Stil shrugged. "Pets," he said. "But, it would appear we are here for the night, so we should enjoy it. Tonight we will have a feast," Stil promised.

"I look forward to it," Angelique smiled.

"It will take me a while to get everything ready. Do you need to see to Pegasus or anything?" Stil asked.

"No, but if you do not mind, I think I would like…rest for a while," Angelique said, standing up.

"Certainly. Any of the rooms are open—except mine and the frost room," Stil said, finally releasing Gemma. "Take all the time you need," he added, calling over his shoulder as he left the parlor.

"Except for…Gemma, are you in the last room in the hallway?" Angelique asked.

"Yes."

“Oh,” Angelique said, her eyes wide. She turned a thoughtful eye on Gemma and studied her from head to toe. “I’m glad you are so lovely. If you will excuse me, I will see you at our banquet.”

When the enchantress left, Gemma stood, alone, in the parlor, trying to organize her thoughts. “*I’m* lovely?” she snorted. She shook her head and looked around the room for the cape she made Stil. She didn’t see it—he must have carried it off or stowed it while she was fetching tea.

Recalling the cape made Gemma, unfortunately, recall Stil’s reaction.

“It’s just a phase,” she decided. “Now that Angelique has joined us, he will stop this foolishness.

“So, how long have you known Stil?” Angelique asked.

Gemma and Angelique were seated at a table in a dining room Gemma didn’t previously know existed. They had just finished the massive amount of food Stil—or, more correctly, Stil’s magical kitchen—had prepared for them. The craftmage was off getting dessert. Gemma didn’t think she had any room to spare, and she thought they had already eaten dessert between the fresh fruits, candied nuts, and pastries, but Stil insisted she eat more.

So, Gemma and Angelique sat together, waiting for Stil to return.

It was a little awkward, truth be told.

“A few weeks,” Gemma said, clasping her hands in her lap. “And you, Lady Enchantress?”

“I’ve lost track of the time, but years. Would you like to know more?” the beautiful enchantress asked.

Lacking any other discussion topics, Gemma nodded.

“My Master and I were traveling when we found Stil in a market in Baris. He was a youngster—twelve or thirteen I believe—and was selling stone beads. My Master recognized him for what he was and tried to get him to leave with us, but Stil was suspicious of him,” Angelique said, pausing to take a sip of wine.

Gemma nodded again to show she was listening.

“Eventually, my Master realized Stil found me less intimidating and instructed me to talk him around. I…managed it. We brought him to the school at the Veneno Conclave where he proved to be a veritable genius at craft magic,” Angelique said.

Is she trying to show that she knows him better? Or that she has first preference? That is silly. I am not in a position to be competition. I better make that clear.

"I see," Gemma said. "It is obvious you have a bright relationship with Mage Stil."

"Friendship," Angelique corrected. "I flatter myself to say I am like an older sister to him."

"Oh, no," Gemma said, shaking her head. "He cares for you much more than as a sister."

Angelique smiled. "I fear my crying episode earlier gave you the wrong impression. I treasure Stil's friendship, but that is all we have," she said, taking another sip of her wine.

"Perhaps that is all you *think* you have," Gemma said.

Angelique choked on her wine and coughed, placing her hand on her chest.

"Right! The tarts finally set—what happened?" Stil asked, blowing into the room, carrying a number of tarts on a silver platter.

Angelique tried to speak but could only cough.

"I was clearing up a miscommunication," Gemma said.

Angelique gave Gemma a look of horror.

Unsure to interpret whether that meant her guess was correct and Angelique wanted more, or that her guess was dead wrong on Angelique's end, she shrugged at the enchantress.

"I see," Stil said, putting the platter down on the table.

"As marvelous as all this food was, I find that I am simply exhausted, and I must beg your pardon and excuse myself," Angelique said, daintily yawning when she recovered. "Thank you, Stil. The food was outstanding."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Stil said.

"Why doesn't she have to eat dessert?" Gemma asked as Stil set three different tarts on a pewter plate in front of her.

"Because I don't care what she does," Stil said, tapping the end of Gemma's nose.

"I enjoyed conversing with you, Gemma. I will see both of you in the morning," Angelique said with another one of her beautiful smiles.

"Goodnight," Stil said before Angelique disappeared through the door. "That was excellent timing," he said, picking up his chair from the head of

the table and placing it directly next to Gemma's.

Gemma shifted her chair down. "Why?"

"Because now we can talk. We never did finish our earlier conversation," Stil said, inching his chair closer.

Gemma shifted her chair farther down the table again. "I don't recall there being anything *to* talk about. You were obviously under a lot of pressure, but now the Lady Enchantress is here."

"Gemma, I'm not a rare animal. I don't undergo metamorphosis if I'm not near other magic users. The truth is, I don't really *like* many magic users," Stil said.

"That's not true; you like the Lady Enchantress Angelique," Gemma said. She realized that might sound like jealousy, so she quickly added, "Which is to be expected. She's lovely, and I think you two would do quite well together."

Stil snorted. "I am not in love with Angelique. I'm in love with you," he said, scooting closer.

Gemma pushed her chair away. "Well, that's not proper."

"Why not?"

"Because I am not a magic user."

"There is no rule that mages can only love fellow mages. Even if there was, your work is beautiful enough, I think it's fairly obvious you have a faint strain of magic in your blood."

"Even so, it still wouldn't be proper."

"Why not?" Stil asked, butting his chair up against Gemma's.

"Because of the age difference."

"Age difference?"

"Of course. Surely you can't be a day younger than fifty or sixty," Gemma said in surprise.

Stil's jaw dropped.

At his outraged expression, Gemma tried to shift her chair but found she was stuck against a table leg.

"You think I'm an *old man*?!" Stil thundered.

"Most magic users are not the age they physically appear to be," Gemma said. "And it is well known that they age much more slowly."

"You think I'm an *OLD MAN*?!" he repeated, his voice even louder.

Gemma frowned and lost her fake pleasant edge. "You dress… uniquely, and you went through the schooling. That must have taken at

least a decade."

"I'm not even twenty-five yet, you mean-spirited mule, and my clothes are *fashionable* among mages!" Stil said.

Gemma rolled her eyes. "Now you sound like you are talking to Pricker Patch."

"I very well may be for all the attention *you* give me!" Stil said. "This whole time you've thought I am *OLD*?"

"You didn't remove your hood until a few days ago. I had no idea what you looked like—or even if your appearance would represent your proper age."

"It's the enchanters and enchantresses who never seem to age. I'm a *craftmage*! I will outlive you by a little, but only by decade or two! You thought I was *OLD*?"

"I get the impression that offends you."

"IT DOES."

Gemma only lifted her eyebrows and prodded a tart.

"Aren't you going to apologize?" Stil asked.

"For what?"

"For thinking I'm *OLD*!"

Gemma shrugged. "It seems you have only yourself to blame for that misunderstanding."

Stil glowered and stabbed a tart with a knife.

"If you are not yet twenty-five, and if Lady Enchantress Angelique met you with her master when you were twelve or thirteen, you must be freshly out of the Conclave school," Gemma observed.

"And now you are accusing me of being a green mage! No. I went through the schooling system quite quickly and finished my apprenticeship by the time I was eighteen," Stil said, his voice wry but at a much lower volume.

"Impressive. You must be the genius the Lady Enchantress says you are."

Stil ran a hand through his feathered, black hair—it was short again—and sighed. "I don't know about genius. I would reserve that word for people like Angelique's master enchanter, Evariste. It is true, though, that I am the most gifted craftmage in the past few decades. Possibly the century. Which isn't quite as impressive as it sounds. Craft magic is useful for luxuries—protection charms in jewelry, clothes spelled to dazzle, that

kind of thing—and for everyday work—like wagon wheels spelled to last extra long or wood furniture charmed to resist fire."

"But when one reaches your level, your usefulness expands," Gemma guessed.

Stil reluctantly nodded. "I can place higher-level charms and magic into objects, and I am one of a few living craftmages who can spell weapons."

Gemma narrowed her eyes. "If others can spell weapons, why would Angelique call you a genius?"

Stil made a face at Gemma. "I don't like to boast," he said, "but I can bespell weapons faster with higher spells and at a greater rate than anyone else. I could spend a day spelling a hundred weapons to hold lightning magic. The other mages would take an hour just to produce one or two."

"So, you could outfit an army," Gemma said.

Stil shrugged. "If I chose to. Most members of nobility are unaware of that particular skill of mine. They treasure me for spelled jewelry and clothes."

"But it would explain why you are being hunted."

Stil blinked. "What?"

"If you could supply spelled weapons for an entire army in a matter of days, that would make you a great threat."

"To…?"

"To this plague of darkness you spoke of. You said Angelique's master was done away with by the masterminds, yes? Wouldn't it be plausible that they know of your abilities and realized that if war is declared, your skills would give us a significant advantage?" Gemma asked.

Stil was a frozen statue. He didn't blink, even when Gemma shifted, attempting to untangle her chair from his.

"You are right," he said. "Gemma, you are brilliant!"

Gemma shrugged. "I'm not sure how you missed it before."

Stil abruptly stood, pushing his chair away. "I need to tell Angelique this. I hadn't thought of the possibility of actual *war*, but if they are planning for it, there is much to be done," he said before glancing down at Gemma. "Don't think our conversation about my love for you is over."

Gemma raised an eyebrow. "I expect you will come to your senses eventually."

Stil chuckled and swooped in, quickly kissing Gemma on her cheek. “Sleep well. Thank you, darling.”

“I am *not* your darling!” Gemma said to his retreating back.

The mage only laughed and disappeared through the door.

Gemma scrubbed at her cheek and tried a tart. “Delicious,” she said, scrubbing her cheek harder when she could feel her face heating up. She cast an apprehensive look at the door through which Stil had disappeared and shook her head. “He will learn. No mage would love a poor seamstress with a drunk for a father. It’s just not possible.”

Chapter 15

“Are you sure you do not want to ride Pegasus with me, Gemma? The border is but a short distance away. We are nearly there,” Angelique said, seated on her unusual mount.

The equine—Gemma found it difficult to call it a horse—had a horse-like body structure and face, but its shape was oddly fathomless thanks to its fur. The animal looked like a portion of the night sky was removed to fashion its body, for it was blue-black like night, and there were star formations dappling its hide. Eerily, its mane and tail were not made of strands of hair, but more closely resembled black and blue flames.

“I’m fine, thank you,” Gemma said, laying a hand on Pricker Patch’s neck for reassurance.

The glowering donkey ignored the touch and plowed forward through the light dusting of snow.

“Don’t pet him too much, Gemma, or Pricker Patch will be too deliriously happy to eat tonight,” Stil said, adjusting his cape—the cape Gemma made for him.

Gemma eyed the stoic donkey whose expression hadn’t budged. “I doubt that.”

“Stil is right,” Angelique said from the back of her unnatural mount. “I have never seen Pricker Patch so content before,” she said as her dress changed into the same deep blue/purple color as the sky was taking on while the sun sank farther over the horizon.

Stil squinted at the darkening horizon, or what could be seen of it through the few mountains that jutted up into the sky. “We will confront the rider tonight?”

“Yes. I will leave soon after. Pegasus runs better at night, and I must tell the Conclave of Gemma’s observations,” Angelique said.

“So, you think it’s true?” Gemma asked.

“Pardon?”

“You think Stil is being targeted for his unique skills?”

“Yes. Normally, one would not think of Stil as being a threat. He hasn’t the fire power of some other mages. But if one is looking at widespread

war that will cause countries to form an alliance…Stil would have a larger impact than any single enchanter," Angelique said.

"I see," Gemma said.

"When Angelique and I go face the rider, Gemma, I ask that you remain at camp," Stil piped in. "It's going to be a battle, and I fear the rider would attack you," he said, reaching over Pricker Patch's neck to smooth Gemma's wavy hair.

Gemma fixed her hair when Stil finished. "Of course," she said.

"You agree so easily?" Angelique asked as her mount pinned its ears and shook its head.

"Naturally," Gemma said. "My survival instincts are quite strong, and I know I have few—or perhaps even no—skills of combat. It would be safer for me to remain as far away as possible. Besides, someone must see that Pricker Patch and…,"

"Pegasus."

"Pricker Patch and Pegasus are fed and watered," Gemma said.

"Good. And thank you," Stil said.

Angelique laughed. "I like her, Stil. You've chosen well."

"Thank you," Stil glowed.

Gemma sighed loudly.

"Although the lady does not seem joyous," Angelique added, struggling with her mount, who pranced with impatience.

"I will wear her down," Stil said.

Gemma raised her eyebrows.

After a few more minutes of travel—when it was barely light enough to still see—Stil called a halt. "We'll pitch the tent here," Stil said. "Even after Angelique clears the rider off, I'm not keen to sleep in a realm outside the Snow Queen's protection."

"Where will you go tomorrow?" Angelique asked.

"I don't know," Stil admitted, unpacking the tent from Pricker Patch's back.

"I suggest you go to Loire and seek out Prince Severin and Princess Elle," Angelique said. "Though Severin's curse is broken, I feel out of all the royals in the continent, he has the best understanding of what we are up against."

"Perhaps I should offer my services to him," Stil said as he started piecing the tent together.

Angelique nodded. “He and Princess Elle recently hosted Crown Prince Cristoph and Princess Cinderella—although by now she is almost Queen Cinderella—of Erlauf. I believe he meant to speak to them about their goblin infestation.”

“So, he’s starting to organize.”

“Yes.”

“Then as long as Gemma has no objections, I think we will call upon the Price and Princess,” Stil said, looking to Gemma.

“Do they live in Noyers?” Gemma asked, naming the capital of Loire.

“No. They live in a chateau that is quite close, though, since the roads have been repaired,” Angelique said.

Gemma nodded. “I would like to travel to Loire.”

Stil finished pitching the tent and studied her with narrowed eyes. “You plan to abandon me for Noyers.”

Gemma pressed her lips together.

“You will be able to find work there, but you will be safer with me,” Stil said.

“This I doubt so long as you are sought out by darkness,” Gemma said.

Angelique laughed as she slid from her mount’s back. “She has you there.”

“But I will be going to see Prince Severin and Princess *Elle*. She sets all the fashions for Loire. Don’t you want to *see* her?” Stil tempted.

Gemma softened her stance as she considered the idea. As much as Gemma would love to see Princess Elle, there was also the business of getting a glimpse of Prince Severin. *Lady Linnea will throttle me if I pass on an opportunity to meet one of her military heroes.*

“Think about it. In the meantime, Angelique and I must leave to get rid of my stalker. Go inside and warm up before you bother with Pricker Patch. He can wait to have his dinner,” Stil said, sliding one arm around Gemma’s waist to force her closer to him. He used his free hand to take one of Gemma’s mittened hands and placed it on his face.

Gemma exhaled loudly to voice her lack of satisfaction.

“I hope you can wear her down before you both die of old age,” Angelique said.

Stil scowled. “Thank you for the show of support, Angelique,” he said before smiling at Gemma. “Be careful,” he said before kissing her on the center of her hair-band.

After a moment, he was gone, taking his heat with him.

"How on earth do you stay warm in that dress?" Stil asked as Angelique took a white muff from the single bag she had slung over her mount's back.

"It's spelled. Master Evariste got it for me," Angelique said as they started out for the border.

"Hm. Spared no expense for his apprentice, did he?"

"Enough, Stil," Angelique said before she and the craftmage fell out of hearing range.

Gemma watched them go, pressing her lips together in worry. "They will be alright," she whispered.

Her reverie was broken by Pricker Patch, who stomped his hooves.

"Yes, I'm going. I'll bring hay for the…guest too," Gemma said, glancing at Angelique's unusual animal.

Gemma ignored Stil's orders and immediately fetched hay and a bit of grain for both of the equines.

Pricker Patch ate his hay with delight—or as much delight as the stoic donkey ever showed—and Pegasus lipped his and shook it around. When it became apparent he wasn't going to eat it, Gemma gave the extra hay to Pricker Patch and tried feeding the strange horse grain instead.

He ate that, and Gemma had just tempted him into drinking lukewarm water when there was a loud explosion that shook the ground.

Pegasus launched into motion, rearing and snorting with a noise that was even less horse-like than his body. Gemma jumped backwards and yelped.

Pricker Patch ate his hay.

Gemma retreated to Pricker Patch's side and leaned against him for warmth and support. Darkness fell like a suffocating mantle, and Gemma dug in her pockets for one of the seven or eight starfires Stil had given her.

"Shine," she whispered to the prism. The crystal glowed, bathing the makeshift camp in soft, white light.

It was several minutes—several very *long* minutes—before Gemma saw the spot of light through the trees that was Angelique's glowing dress.

"Brighter," Gemma said to the prism as the magic users approached. Its fire kindled again; its light shone brighter.

"How did it go?" Gemma asked when Angelique and Stil drew close enough.

Stil clasped his hands over his head and shook them. “Victory!”

“He exaggerates,” Angelique said, removing one of her hands from her white muff to touch her hair. “I did not manage to eradicate the rider.”

“But you landed him an exceptional wound,” Stil said. “He ran away with his tail tucked between his legs to recover.”

“Are you certain?” Gemma asked.

“Positive. Well done, Angelique. You didn’t even have to use your core magic,” Stil said.

“It’s for the better. The Conclave is still mad at me about Arcainia,” Angelique said before she boosted herself onto her mount’s back.

“That’s unfortunate,” Stil said.

“Wait, you’re leaving already?” Gemma asked.

“I said I would leave tonight.”

“But you aren’t coming inside at all? Don’t you want a bit of supper?” Gemma asked.

“Nothing would delight me more, but great haste is required at the moment,” Angelique said.

“Are you *sure*?” Gemma said.

“Why does it seem that you don’t want to be alone with me?” Stil asked.

“I could make tea,” Gemma said.

Angelique smiled, stealing Gemma’s breath with her beauty. “You are too kind, but I must refuse. Don’t worry. He won’t eat you alive,” she said, turning her horse in a circle.

Gemma said nothing but laid her head against Pricker Patch’s thick neck.

“Wait a moment, Angelique. I have something for you,” Stil said, disappearing into the tent. When he emerged, he carried the black cloak he used to wear. He passed it up to the beautiful enchantress.

“Your cloak?” Angelique blinked. “I noticed you have a new one, but…,”

“Most of the magic is drained from it,” Stil admitted. “But it still has a few good spells left in the cloth that you might find useful—invisibility, heat and cooling charms, and fire resistance.”

“I see. Thank you,” Angelique said, her voice warm with affection as she tucked the cloak into her saddlebag with her muff.

Stil bowed at the waist. “Safe journeys,” he said.

“To you, as well. I look forward to the next time we meet—that includes you, Gemma,” Angelique said.

“Good luck,” Gemma said.

“Thank you. Farewell,” Angelique said before leaning over her horse’s neck. Pegasus leapt forward into a canter. He seemed to glow as he ran, resembling a comet the way his fiery tail streamed behind him.

Stil and Gemma watched until the horse and rider disappeared.

When they were gone, Stil turned to smile at Gemma. “I see you are using a starfire. How do you like them?” Stil asked.

“Dim,” Gemma said to the prism, which grew dimmer in response. “Quite a bit. They are very useful. Thank you.”

Stil shrugged. “It’s just a trinket, but I’m glad you like them.”

The craftmage was quiet as he ran his hands over Pricker Patch and checked the donkey’s feet. “I’m glad you’re coming to Loire with me,” he finally said.

“I haven’t yet agreed to call upon their majesties Prince Severin and Princess Elle,” Gemma said.

“I am choosing to thank you in advance. Or, I will stay with you in Noyers as long as it takes to convince you to travel with me,” Stil said. The silver embroidery on his shoulders glowed in the moonlight and the dim illumination of Gemma’s starfire.

Gemma pet Pricker Patch.

“No complaints? I am already gaining ground,” Stil said, smiling.

“I am nothing but a phase,” Gemma said. “When we rejoin the rest of the continent, you will forget Verglas and everything related to it.”

“I won’t,” Stil said. “And I will be level with you: I find your complete lack of faith in my fidelity hurtful.”

“You are a mage—a very wealthy one, I might add,” Gemma said.

“I’m still a human, Gemma. I still have a heart and breathe like a man. See?” Stil said, plucking her mittened hand off Pricker Patch and sliding it under his black, wool cape.

Gemma couldn’t feel his heartbeat, but she felt his chest rise and fall with each breath he took.

“Is it me?” Stil asked, his eyes narrowed, his head tilted. “Am I lacking in some way? Is it something about me?”

Gemma shook her head once.

“Then what is it?”

Gemma lifted her icy eyes to meet Stil's searing blue gaze. "My life has taught me that I cannot expect happy endings."

No sooner were the words out of Gemma's mouth than a piercing scream flooded the air.

Gemma whipped around, pulling her hand from Stil's grasp. "That was Angelique," she said.

"Impossible. Angelique must already be at least two miles from here. There isn't a horse alive than can keep pace with Pegasus," Stil said.

"That was her voice," Gemma argued. "I haven't known her for long, and even *I* recognized it as hers."

By the dim light the starfire shed, Gemma could see the unease in Stil's eyes. He was worried about her.

"Let's investigate," Gemma said.

"You're staying here," Stil said.

"No," Gemma said. "You said the rider is taken care of. There is no danger."

"There is *less* danger, but it hasn't all disappeared. Verglas is still crawling with soldiers," Stil argued.

"Angelique's scream was surely past the border. We're wasting time," Gemma said.

"It may be a trap," Stil said.

"I can bet you it's a trap," Gemma agreed. "But are you willing to chance it that Angelique is unharmed?"

Still inhaled and fussed with his sleeves as he thought. "Fine. Let me grab supplies from inside, and we can go," he said, disappearing into the tent.

Gemma picketed Pricker Patch to a tent pole and dragged the water to his side. "Be good. Guard the camp," she said.

The donkey flicked an ear but kept eating his hay.

"Ready," Stil said, reappeared with a length of rope hanging from his elbow. "Would you put out your starfire? I would prefer to approach the situation undetected."

"Sure," Gemma said, shaking the starfire to clear away the light. When it stopped glowing, she slipped it back in a pocket on the side of her cape. It clinked like glass when it landed on several other starfires.

"Come here," Stil said, holding his cape out after pulling up his hood.

Gemma frowned. "It's not going to cover both of us."

“It will,” Stil promised. When he dropped the cloth over Gemma, she felt warmer—as though she were standing with her back to the fire—and was able to see through the black silk lining and wool cape as if it were made of gauze even though she knew it *wasn’t*.

“Is this the invisibility you mentioned to Angelique?”

“It is,” Stil affirmed. “We still leave a scent to track, not to mention foot prints, but it is better than nothing.”

“How far away did the scream sound?” Gemma asked.

“I’m not certain. I imagine it is over the Loire border, though,” Stil said, guiding them through the trees so they stayed in the shadows but didn’t brush any foliage or greenery to give away their position. Looking back, Gemma could occasionally see their footprints if the moonlight landed just so, but it was dark, and they were creeping soundlessly. She doubted anyone would see their path.

They moved slowly, creeping their way closer and closer in the direction from which they heard the scream. They had nearly turned the wrong way when they heard the scream again.

“Angelique,” Stil whispered.

Though she couldn’t see his face, Gemma felt all of Stil’s muscles stiffen in worry.

“You must really care for her,” Gemma whispered. Her slowness to speak was gone, burned away by the concern lining Stil’s face.

“It’s not what you think,” Stil said. “Or maybe it was when I first met her and was enrolled in the Conclave’s school. She saved me, you know? But I haven’t thought of her in that way in years,” Stil said. “I outgrew it.”

“Like you will outgrow me,” Gemma said.

“No,” Stil said, his voice soft and patient. “I was a child back then. Now, I am a grown man. My love for you is far different and far greater.”

“This isn’t the time to discuss it.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t know when you *will* discuss it—” Stil hushed himself when a branch snapped somewhere past the wall of pine trees along which they crept. Stil peeled back the cape long enough to show Gemma his finger pressed to his lips before he drew her back in the depths of the cloak.

They crouched and crawled under the tree branches, careful not to scrape anything or make a noise. They made it through the tree wall and squinted in the darkness. Gemma didn’t see the tell-tale glow of

Angelique's dress anywhere. Perhaps the Lady Enchantress had already escaped?

Stil and Gemma took two steps into the dark clearing before the hellhound jumped them from behind. The animal pounced on Stil, knocking Gemma out of the warmth of the craftmage's cape and into the cold snow. Gemma gasped at the temperature change and the jarring pain in her knees and arms from catching herself, but she scrambled to her feet.

The hellhound had Stil pinned beneath him, its giant claws digging into Stil's shoulders—but oddly not piercing through the cloth of Stil's cape as it lowered is massive head. Stil caught the thing by the throat and jaws, keeping it from snapping at his face.

While the two struggled, Gemma tucked her chin and ran. She rammed into the hellhound's side, knocking the beast off Stil.

"*Cudere*," Stil shouted, his voice hoarse as he tossed a metal bar into the air. He grabbed Gemma's arm and dragged her to the side, barely moving aside in time to miss the hellhound lunging at their legs.

"Blaze!" Stil said before he caught his bar—which had transformed into a double tipped spear while in the air. Gemma couldn't say she noticed how or when. The spear glowed with the intensity of lightning. It crackled as Stil swiped it through the air, narrowing missing the hellhound.

The beast leap backwards and growled. Its hackles raised as it crouched on the ground.

And then Angelique screamed again.

A nightmareish horse skulked into the clearing. Its eyes were milky white; its nostrils flared red, and it was thin and wretched looking.

On its back was a rider clothed in black with a hood shadowing its face. He—or it—had a grievous chest wound that oozed a black, tarry substance, and its breath came in pained wheezes. The rider held a small orb of black fire, and when it squeezed the fire, the scream was produced.

Angelique wasn't injured at all. It was a trick to draw Stil across the border.

"Gemma, run back Verglas," Stil whispered as he stepped between Gemma and the black creatures. "Get to the tent. Stay there until daylight. Then send word for Angelique."

"Contact her yourself," Gemma hissed, picking up a large rock.

“Gemma, I can’t protect you. I’m not the right kind of mage!” he said before bringing his spear up to take a blow from the hellhound. He twisted, using momentum and his weight to send the beast flying.

“Then we run together,” Gemma said.

Stil mirthlessly laughed. “Fine. Stay close,” he said, twirling his spear.

There was no exchange of insults with the rider. There was no attempt to reason or speak because there was no need. As Gemma stared at the cloaked figure, she could feel nothing but evil and an endless thirst for bloodshed. The rider could not be reasoned with. He and his beasts were made entirely of darkness. Stil fought the hellhound, alternating between blinding the beast with his weapon and driving it away with his spear. The dog snarled, foam dripping from its mouth as it blindly lunged at Stil. Stil rammed the pole of his spear into the beast’s mouth. The dog snapped its jaws around the pole, but Stil threw his weight into the weapon and flipped the beast backwards.

The rider loaded a black bolt into its crossbow and aimed the weapon.

Gemma threw her rock. It missed the rider but hit its horse, making the animal shriek and dance sideways. The rider released the bolt from his crossbow, but Stil dodged it, running forward to spear the hellhound.

The dog slipped under Stil’s spear and lunged for him, but it missed and locked its jaws on Stil’s new cape.

“Blaze!” Stil said, slamming his weapon on the beast’s skull while lighting the clearing up like a fire.

Gemma threw her second rock at the rider—this time pelting him in the chest. The rider turned its horse in a circle and hissed.

The hellhound disengaged from Stil and ran at Gemma.

“Climb a tree!” Stil shouted, chasing the hound. He managed to land a blow on the beast’s shoulder, opening a deep wound, but the mongrel ignored it and scrabbled for Gemma. Gemma had just enough time to throw herself on the trunk of a tree and clear the first branch. The hellhound caught the hem of her cape and pulled, yanking her back by the clasp at her neck.

She choked and almost lost hold of the tree, but the hellhound let go and leapt backwards to avoid the spear Stil tossed at it like a javelin. The spear missed.

“*Cudere*,” Stil called, holding his arm out in front of him. The spear shook before flying out of the ground in which it was impaled and hurtling

back to the craftmage. Stil spun around and thrust the spear out in front just in time to intercept another bolt from the rider.

The hellhound growled and snapped at Gemma's feet; she kept her cloak wrapped tightly around herself so none of it draped. She pulled a fairly sizable dead branch off the tree and dropped it on the hellhound. It cracked in half after hitting the animal's skull.

The hound snarled, but it held its ground between Stil and Gemma.

Stil faked a jab to the beast's left before carrying through, turning the jab into a slash that landed squarely on its already-wounded shoulder. The beast yelped and scrambled backwards. Stil was about to finish the animal off with a well-placed jab when he froze. He turned to face the rider before he fell to his knees, letting Gemma see the black arrow that poked out of his left shoulder.

Stil fell face forward into the ground, his breath rattling in his chest.

No, no, NO!

"NO!" Gemma shouted, leaping from the tree. She landed on the injured hellhound that was dragging itself towards Stil. Her entire body jarred when she hit the animal, making a faint clinking noise.

Panic poured through her, unleashed by the sight of Stil's bleeding shoulder. Her usual calm abandoned her like warmth in a snowstorm.

Not Stil! Anything—except that!

Gemma grabbed the idea and used it to push her mind into motion. She needed to understand what was happening! There was a distinct pattern to the battle, and more than the obvious tactic that the hellhound attacked while the rider shot arrows. There was something missing—like hems and seams, hidden from sight but stitching cloth together. *Wait, could it be…?*

"Gemma, run," Stil grimaced as Gemma scrambled the few feet to him.

"Its weakness is light, right?" Gemma asked, her breath coming in heavy pants as her heart pounded in her throat.

"What?" Stil groaned as the nightmare mount sauntered in their direction.

"The rider and hellhound! They cannot abide light, right?"

"Right."

"Good," Gemma said, digging in her pockets as the hellhound dragged itself in their direction.

"What are you doing? Run, you mule," Stil coughed.

“It’s easier to take apart a piece of clothing if you rip out the seams. We were just stabbing at the cloth,” Gemma said.

“What?” Stil said, confused by Gemma’s babble

The rider was almost on them when Gemma’s fingers closed on what she was looking for. Gemma plucked at least four starfires out and shouted “SHINE! Shine your brightest!”

The prisms glowed with the intensity of the sun, bathing the clearing in light so brilliant, even Gemma couldn’t see. The hellhound, nightmare, *and* the rider shrieked with pain as the light poured over their bodies, invading every crevice.

Gemma dropped the prisms on the ground and turned her back to the light to pick two more starfires out of her pocket. “SHINE!” she shouted when she realized she faced the blinded, injured hellhound. The animal scrunched its eyes shut and leapt at her, mouth gaping. It latched down on Gemma’s arm, making her scream when its fangs sank into the flesh of her arm.

Gemma gritted her teeth and kneed the creature in the chest, trying to make it release her. It flopped but didn’t let go. Gemma punched its head with her fist that held the starfires. The animal released her and choked, writhing on the ground when one of the prisms fell down its throat.

Light erupted from its mouth, and the hellhound howled.

“Dim!” Gemma shouted.

The star fires dimmed enough that Gemma could see without stars in her eyes.

It was still too much for the nightmare mount; it reared, unseating the rider, and took off, galloping through the dark woods with angry screams.

Gemma glanced over her shoulder at the writhing hellhound, her shoulders heaving as she observed the creature’s pain while light invaded it from the inside out.

Gemma’s fist tightened around an unlit starfire. She ran towards the rider, kicking up snow. “SHINE!” she shouted, grabbing the thrown rider by its cloak.

The rider was even more terrifying to behold than Gemma had steeled herself for. Instead of a flesh-covered face it had a bare skull. The rider’s jaw was square and blocky to support its bloated incisors that were coated with a red so dark and rusty, it was almost black. There were gaping holes instead of eyes, and its breath reeked of sulfur and brimstone.

The rider wasn't a mindless creature—like the hellhound or the horse—nor was it crazed and mad with greed—like King Torgen. Instead it was a hole of darkness, seeking to devour everything good and righteous in its path.

As the rider struggled to bring up its loaded crossbow, Gemma said to her starfire, "Shine even brighter."

She shoved the blazing prism into the rider's chest wound as the rider scrabbled with the crossbow trigger. Its tarry blood burned her hand, but she gritted her teeth and let go of the starfire before she ripped her hand from the creature's chest cavity—which now shown like a comet.

The rider dropped its crossbow and tried to tear the prism out of its chest, but it was in vain. Light coursed from its head to its toes, and it raised its hands in a silent scream before turning to ash and blowing away in the wind, leaving behind the starfire—which still shone brilliantly.

"Dim," Gemma called. To her relief, the painful brightness of the starfires decreased. Gemma pushed herself to her feet and staggered to Stil, who had pushed himself up on his elbows.

"What was THAT?" Stil said, struggling to lift his head.

"We were concentrating too much on fighting. All we needed was to make it bright, and they wouldn't be able to stand it."

"And you realized that *how*?"

"You said they couldn't travel in daylight." Gemma said, swallowing to make her voice strong as she looked at Stil's wound. "What are we going to do?"

"It's not as bad as it looks," he said when he managed to raise his head. "Leave it in for now—to staunch the blood flow. It's not in very deep. If we get back to the tent, I'll be fine," he grimaced. "I have a kit and some potions there. By stars and fire dust, does this hurt."

"Can you stand? I could get Pricker Patch, but I don't want to leave you," Gemma said.

"No, I can walk. If you would just help me stand—," Stil broke off when a dog whined behind them.

"…What happened to the hellhound?" Stil asked.

Gemma scrambled for her starfires and turned around, scooping up the prisms and snow, but she needn't bother.

The snarling, emaciated hellhound was gone. In its place was a good-sized canine/wolf-ish looking creature. It had thick white fur, but the tip of

its tail was black, as were its paws and legs, almost as if it wore boots. The tips of its ears were flecked with black too, and it had a number of odd but beautiful black marks around its eyes, like they had been inked by an artist.

It sniffed its wet, inquisitive nose at Stil and Gemma and wagged its tail.

"I have never seen a creature like that," Stil said, clamping his jaws together in pain as Gemma helped him stand.

"If we ignore it, will it go away?" Gemma asked, hefting Stil's arm over his shoulder so she could bear some of his weight.

"I don't know, but I find I just don't care enough to deal with it right now. Let's go," Stil said, nodding in the direction of their camp.

The walk back was long and excruciating. Gemma's heart beat painfully in her throat, and she could only imagine the pain Stil felt.

The craftmage bore it all without a noise, although he did gasp occasionally.

When they pushed through the last layer of trees and could see the brown spot on a field of white snow that was Pricker Patch—even this far away he looked displeased—both Gemma and Stil sighed in relief.

"Just a little ways," Stil said, teetering dangerously for a moment.

"Yes. Just a little," Gemma said, supporting the mage. She blinked when snow started to fall and settled on her eyelashes. "Just put one foot in front of the other," she coached before they started walking again.

They were halfway across the field when the first beam of light broke over the hill. Just as the light broke, soldiers in the Verglas uniform poured over the crest.

"*Oh no*," Gemma breathed.

"Leave me," Stil said. "Run to the tent. Once you get in, it will lock itself if anyone tries to follow you."

"No," Gemma said.

"Gemma, don't be a fool!"

"It's me they're looking for," Gemma said, a clear-headed calmness falling over her.

The options were obvious. If she ran, they would take Stil. Who knew if he would survive the arrow, much less King Torgen. If they tried to run together, they would never reach the tent, and they *both* would be captured.

The least dangerous option was to turn herself in. Gemma had made up her mind to even before she made her evaluations.

Stil had to be saved. Not because he would be more useful to the countries in the fight against darkness, or even because Gemma owed him a great debt. In fact, her decision had nothing to do with practicality, and everything to do with her heart.

I will have to ponder this later, Gemma thought.

Stil gripped her shoulder with the hand thrown over her. “Gemma, I won’t let you sacrifice yourself for me! You deserve the happy ending.”

“Gemma Kielland?” a soldier shouted.

“And I won’t get it if King Torgen has you thrown into a prison.”

Stil didn’t even hear what she was admitting to. “He can’t keep me forever. The Conclave would come for me. You’re running out of time. *Run*!” Stil said, trying to push Gemma away from him.

Gemma slipped away and folded Stil on to his knees before she placed her handful of starfires in his hand. “Thank you, for everything.”

“Gemma Kielland, we are armed and have you in our sights. Turn yourself in, and you will come to no harm,” the soldier shouted. In the moonlight, Gemma could see rows of soldiers carrying bows glittering on the snow.

“Don’t even think of it!” Stil hissed. “Blast your sacrifices and practicality! ***RUN***!”

Gemma shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. “You don’t understand, Stil,” she said, her heart breaking.

“Don’t do this, Gemma,” Stil pleaded. He scattered the starfires as he dropped them to reach for her hands.

Gemma smiled and leaned forward, kissing Stil on the forehead. “Take care, Stil,” she said.

“Gemma!”

Gemma turned to the soldiers and walked to them, her heart twisting with each step she took away from Stil. She didn’t turn around. She couldn’t. If she did, she would lose all the strength she had.

“GEMMA!” Stil shouted.

Four soldiers met Gemma halfway to the army. They searched her for weapons—tossing the few remaining starfires she had on her—and restrained her hands in iron shackles.

“Gemma Kielland has been found. We return to Ostfold *immediately*. Ready the horses!” a soldier shouted.

Within moments, a chestnut horse was brought forward. A soldier mounted it, and Gemma was passed up to him.

“GEMMA!” Stil shouted again.

The soldiers ignored him and trekked back up the hill, aiming north… for Ostfold.

Gemma squirmed in the soldier’s grip to get one last look of Stil.

He was a dab of black among the snow that was falling in large, beautiful flakes. Gemma’s starfires were littered around him like tiny flames. He had managed to partially stand, but as the soldier spurred his horse into a trot, Stil fell to his knees, calling out for Gemma.

Far back, in the shadows of the field, Gemma saw the white lupine.

They started down the hill, and the snowy field veered from sight. “Goodbye, Stil,” Gemma whispered before she lost sight of him.

“Press on to Ostfold. The King wants her,” the soldier leading the hunt told Gemma’s captor, joining them on a bay-colored horse.

“Yessir,” Gemma’s captor said.

“I apologize, Miss Kielland. I wish we could release you, but we haven’t a choice,” the leading soldier said.

“I understand,” Gemma said.

“Send a messenger ahead. I’m sure the King will want to know his future queen is on the way home. Let’s move out!” the soldier said, heeling his horse into a canter.

Above the thunder of pounding hooves, Gemma heard the howl of a wolf.

Chapter 16

Considering how long it took Gemma and Stil to walk to the Loire border with Pricker Patch, traveling back to Ostfold took a painfully short time. The soldiers stopped every few hours for fresh horses, which allowed them to keep their grueling pace, and they stopped to rest only whenever Gemma was in danger of falling off due to exhaustion.

In far too short a time, Gemma stood before King Torgen, saddle sore, bruised, with her arm injured from the hellhound and her hand burnt from the rider's black blood.

King Torgen received her in a palace courtyard, where the wind blew and snow stung all who were stationed outside.

"Gemma Kielland, you have returned to me," King Torgen said. He approached her with his arms spread wide, as if to hug her. When he drew close, he back-handed her and encircled her neck with his hands. "Although you will be punished for fleeing."

Gemma gagged but kicked out, kneeing King Torgen in the stomach.

The King staggered backwards with an "oomph."

"Restrain her," King Torgen snarled, clutching his gut.

Two soldiers placed their hands on Gemma's shoulders, their faces wiped of emotion.

When King Torgen came at Gemma again, Gemma didn't wait. She swung her shackled arms through the air, snapping the chains in the king's face.

"I said restrain her!" King Torgen howled, his hands covering his face.

The soldiers lowered their grasp to her elbows, holding Gemma still.

King Torgen cursed and roared in pain as Gemma lifted her chin and raised an eyebrow up in the most arrogant expression she could muster.

Gemma was done behaving. She would rather be dead than let Torgen touch her. It was over.

"You think you are safe because you are to become my queen?" King Torgen said, finally lowering his hands.

"No. I think I did not keep my part of the bargain and failed to spin all the flax into gold," Gemma said, recalling the vast spread of flax. "Thus, I am subject to death."

King Torgen's ugly glower faded from his face, and instead his features were pinched as hysterical laughter poured from his mouth. "You think I will let you go? You think I will let you escape into death?"

King Torgen abruptly stopped laughing and grabbed Gemma by the throat of her cape, yanking her—and the soldiers—forward. "I will *never* set you free."

"And I will never spin for you again," Gemma said, the strength of her heart helping her to meet King Torgen's feverish eyes with all the ice she could muster in her own gaze. "You may clutch my broken body for all eternity, but I will never give you even a glimmer of gold."

King Torgen released one bark of laughter. "We shall see, Gemma Kielland. I have ways of making people obey my orders," he snarled. "Toril!"

The prince, who was standing in the doorway, hesitantly joined King Torgen. "Yes, Father?"

"Take Gemma—your soon to be step-mother—to her new chambers. See to it that she has everything she needs to present herself as a bride. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Gemma said, choking on disbelief.

"Yes. Tomorrow, Verglas will have a new queen," King Torgen smirked.

"Yes, Farther," Prince Toril said, his voice a whisper. He motioned to the soldiers holding Gemma to follow him before he turned and walked back to the refuge of the palace.

Toril and the soldiers were silent as they marched through the palace, moving up hallways and crossing corridors.

Toril glanced over his shoulder, his eyes lingering on Gemma's hurt hand. "You were injured?" he asked.

Gemma shrugged. "I was hurt before I was found."

"I see," Toril said before addressing the soldiers. "Take her to the queen's chambers. I will have a squadron of palace guards replace you."

"My Lord?" one of the soldiers said as the prince abruptly turned and walked in the opposite direction.

"I have other things to attend to," Toril called over his shoulder.

The soldiers walked on, escorting Gemma to a beautiful, luxurious room.

The bedroom was bathed in soft shades of cream and yellow. The ceiling was vaulted, painted with a mural of blue skies and snowflakes. The furniture was simple but elegant in taste, painted white and smooth to the touch.

It wasn't like a typical Verglas luxurious bedroom. It was brighter, happier, and perfectly preserved.

"These are the queen's rooms?" Gemma said, confused.

"King Torgen had the room decorated for the previous queen," a soldier said.

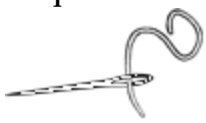
Gemma looked around the room as the soldiers unlatched her shackles. "Did he love her?" she asked. She could barely remember the queen. She died in childbirth, the unborn baby dying with her, when Gemma was still a toddler.

The soldier removing her shackles briefly stilled. "Yah," he said. "She tamed him." The silence stretched on as the second soldier checked that the two windows were locked and secured.

The soldiers bowed to Gemma and moved to leave the room. The soldier who answered Gemma's question lingered in the doorway. "Whatever our queen saw in him that she loved is gone now," he said before closing the door.

Gemma heard the familiar clank as the door was locked from the outside. She was left alone in the room that seemed to whisper with ghosts of the past. She sat down on a stool and leaned against the wall, shutting her eyes.

Gemma had no memories of King Torgen and his queen together, but the care and love that went into the decorating of the room was unmistakable. However, Gemma knew the soldier was right. Whatever part of King Torgen that cared about this room was gone, killed off long ago by the onslaught of bitterness and unquenchable hatred.



When the door clanked and was thrown open an hour later, Gemma tumbled off her stool in surprise.

"Gemma—you look terrible! But that is to be expected, I suppose. I am a healer, I am here to heal. That's what healers do. Hah-hah."

Gemma's jaw dropped as she looked up at the cloaked figure. Even though she was veiled, Gemma would recognize the owner of that voice

anywhere.

“You strapping guards should leave the healing to those who know what how to heal: healers. When I’m ready to come out, I will knock,” the cloaked figure said, patting the basket that swung from her arm.

“Yes, ma’am,” a guard at the door said—Gemma recognized it was Foss. The guard winked at her before shutting the door.

“That is an excessively *bad* disguise, My Lady,” Gemma said.

Lady Linnea waddled forward, wearing robes that drowned her body and a mismatched veil that covered her face. “I know, but how else was I supposed to get in here? Besides, the guards aren’t going to tell anyone,” Lady Linnea. “I hope you know what to do with this stuff,” she added, setting a heavy basket on the floor. “I’ve got bandages, but I don’t know what any of these balms are. By the Snow Queen, do they ever reek.”

“What are you *doing* here?”

“I’m visiting you, of course. Hello, Gemma. I missed you—though I am sorry you didn’t successfully escape,” Lady Linnea said, wrapping her arms around Gemma in a warm hug.

“Thank you,” Gemma said, her voice strong but lined with relief. “What am I to do, My Lady? I don’t think I will be able to escape him a second time.”

Lady Linnea nodded. “Could you kill him?”

“I don’t know,” Gemma admitted.

“He will make you hate him enough that you will want to,” Lady Linnea said.

“Yes, but I don’t *want* to become a person capable of murder.”

“You are right. I wish to shield you from that as well. I don’t think you could handle it. We’re very different, you know,” Lady Linnea said. “You are like the ice and snow that you love so much. Dazzling, without blemish, and a cover that makes all things beautiful.”

Gemma cracked a smile. “That’s romanticizing me quite a bit.”

Lady Linnea shook her head. “You bring out the good in people, and those who scorn you, you freeze with your eyes and words. So, it’s a good thing I am your friend and companion.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I am a sword, dangerous and deadly. And Gemma, I will not hesitate to kill the king to save you,” Lady Linnea said, her voice hard. “It

will not be tomorrow, or perhaps even this year, but I will free you. I promise."

As Gemma studied Lady Linnea, she saw that the noble woman was serious. Lady Linnea was a soldier at heart: dedicated, loyal, and willing to shed blood to make a difference and to fight for what was right. This was a real vow. Gemma could see it in the coldness of her eyes and the set of her chin. Lady Linnea would kill for her, and Gemma thought it likely she would succeed. "I don't want to force that burden on you," Gemma said.

Lady Linnea smiled. "You aren't. And it's not like anyone will truly care. Tor—some people will mourn what was. But the prince will make a better king."

Gemma pushed an eyebrow up. "Oh? Not long ago you were telling me he was far more stupid than you originally estimated."

A pink blush heated Lady Linnea's cheeks. "That was before I knew him. He's different from his father. He is willing—someone just needs to teach him about love."

"Will you be the one to do that, My Lady?"

"Goodness, no!" Lady Linnea snorted. "I still want to see the world. I want to observe Commanding General Severin and set eyes on the famed military of Erlauf. I want to meet a female captain of Farset and perhaps even speak to an assassin from our very own assassins' guild."

"Are you certain?"

"Toril can't love someone like me, Gemma," Lady Linnea said. "I'm too brash and bloodthirsty. He likes the sweet, delicate girls. Like Princess Elise." Gemma thought she could discern the same note of longing in Lady Linnea's voice that the young woman used when she spoke of visiting other countries, but judging by the pain in the last admission, it was unlikely the lady wanted to address her affection for the Verglas prince.

"Is that so," Gemma said.

"But enough of that. Your hand does look horrible. Do you think you can guess which of these wretched-smelling ointments are best for…what, is that, a burn?" Lady Linnea said, digging through her basket.

"Yes."

Lady Linnea hissed through her teeth. "It looks nasty. How did you manage to get it? Moreover, how did you manage to escape?"

"The mage," Gemma said, opening a pot and grimacing at the smell.

“Uh-huh,” Lady Linnea said, unconvinced. “Oh, this is it! I remember—the real healer told me this one is good for burns. It has a very distinctive smell—like horse droppings.”

“That was not the best way to endorse its use,” Gemma said.

“If it kills the pain and heals the skin, does it matter what ingredients are used?” Lady Linnea asked, passing the little container over. “Besides, I think the healer said the main ingredients were vinegar, honey, and potato peelings.”

Gemma wiped the smelly balm on her hand, wincing when her fingers traced the tender skin. Although the smell was noxious, the ointment began to soften the pain almost immediately.

“Here, I can at least bandage your arm,” Lady Linnea said, waving a roll of bandages.

“How did you learn?”

“I read the Erlauf army makes sure all of their soldiers know how to wrap wounds, so I found a book in Papa’s library,” Lady Linnea said, starting to clean and wrap Gemma’s hand and arm. “Toril told me what you can expect: King Torgen is indeed holding the wedding tomorrow. Tonight, a wedding dress will be delivered to your rooms, and the ceremony is to commence before the noon hour tomorrow. It seems that a squadron will be posted out your door all night and in the courtyard below. Unless you want to see all those men killed, I do not think you can escape.”

“No,” Gemma agreed. “We will see what my security measures are like after the wedding,” she said, stifling the desire to flinch.

“Yes,” Lady Linnea said, her reply heavy with unspoken words. “Is there no possibility that your sweetheart will try to rescue you tomorrow?”

Gemma started to correct the lady before she gave up and broke off in a sigh. “No. There’s not even a glimmer of hope,” she said.

Stil was probably still treating his shoulder from the rider’s arrow. And even if he was well enough to move, Pricker Patch could not cover the distance Gemma and the soldiers had covered in such a short amount of time.

“Then we will have to play the waiting game. When you become queen, I will be able to more easily pay social calls to you,” Lady Linnea said. She finished bandaging Gemma’s hand and slipped the tail end of the bandage under one of the wrapped layers.

“Your parents will lock you in your room if you do,” Gemma said.

Lady Linnea gave Gemma a playful grin. “They can try. I will merely have to expand my list of recruits to help me slip out. Sissel has become my newest ally. She is a great help. I am starting to see why you gave your handiwork to those you did. They have come out of the shadows one by one to help me.”

“I am glad,” Gemma smiled.

Lady Linnea picked up her basket of smelly concoctions. “Unfortunately, I need to go.”

“I understand.”

Lady Linnea stared into Gemma’s grey eyes. She placed her free hand on Gemma’s shoulder and pulled her close for a hug. “Be strong, and have courage. I will not abandon you. You can survive this.”

“Thank you,” Gemma said.

“Of course. Take care, until next time,” Lady Linnea winked before adjusting her ill-fitting robe and imperiously knocking on the door.

The door opened, and Lady Linnea slipped out, leaving Gemma alone with her thoughts.

Lady Linnea will move too late. Even if she does attempt to kill King Torgen, he will crush me before she gets the chance to finish him off. King Torgen will ruin me before Lady Linnea can rescue me.

“Lady Linnea is so very valiant…but I don’t think she understands King Torgen’s darkness,” Gemma said, her voice breaking the silence. The thought brought her no comfort, but it stiffened her resolve.

“It’s just as well. I won’t let him break me,” she vowed, straightening a bit of her bandage.

A memory of Stil holding her hands to his face swam through her mind.

“No,” Gemma decided, pushing the thought away. *I refuse to become a silly girl who sighs and grows despondent over matters of the heart*.

“Although I do love him, I think,” Gemma admitted, ever practical. *What was it Grandmother Guri said? To be open to love? Well, I wasn’t. And it still got me in the end—unreasonable heart!*

Gemma scowled at the thought. “Well, it’s done,” she said. “There’s no use ruminating over it. I may as well focus on something productive: making King Torgen angry.”

The following morning, the guards opened the door for two lady's maids, who shrieked when they entered the bedroom.

The wedding dress—which followed royal styles as opposed to civilian styles and was a giant white, puffball of a dress—was ruined. Over night, Gemma had industriously ripped the eyesore to shreds, so no piece bigger than the size of her palm remained.

The pieces were scattered around the room, making it look like a snowstorm had swept through over the course of the night.

Gemma was in the middle of a yawn and was sitting on a padded window seat as opposed to sleeping. "Good morning," she said with a pleased smile. The lady's maids said nothing but flounced out of the room in a huff, their skirts billowing behind them.

Gemma smirked at their retreat and turned to look outside, which looked just as dreary as she felt. Today was the day she was to marry King Torgen.

"It's a shame I haven't any Starfires," Gemma muttered as she thought of the oddly changed hellhound. "I imagine a prism shoved down his throat would greatly alter King Torgen as well."

Chapter 17

All too soon, the lady's maids returned, armed with another ill-fitting, terribly styled dress. Gemma argued with the lady's maids that she could be married in what she was wearing, but judging by their tight motions and squeaky voices, they would face consequences if Gemma did not put on the white monstrosity.

Gemma eventually complied, and, as Lady Linnea had said, by noon she found herself in the Ostfold Cathedral.

The church was breathtaking—the entire thing was made with sanded, unstained wood. It was almost triangular in shape, but tiered like a cake. It followed the Verglas tradition of elaborate woodcarvings of reindeer and snowflakes, and the center tower had windows to let in sunlight. The only spot of color—besides the beautiful reds and browns of the wood—was an intricate, circular stained-glass window set above the altar. It was high up the wall so, should the sun happen to shine, it would cast colored light on the church congregation.

The church was packed with nobles and villagers alike. Gemma was certain it was mandatory for all of Ostfold to attend, as those who couldn't fit in the church were waiting in the streets outside. The citizens were as exuberant for their King's marriage as they were for a funeral.

Gemma tried to appreciate the beauty of the building, but her stomach heaved when she saw King Torgen staring her down from the far end of the church. She would have turned around and stormed back out of the church, but a team of three guards were escorting her down the church aisle, and Gemma doubted they would let her flee.

King Torgen sneered, his face twisted in its usual ugly and half-mad expression. Prince Toril stood behind him, looking sorry. He glanced at a pew in the middle of the church and, following his gaze, Gemma discovered he was looking to the Lovland family, specifically Lady Linnea.

Lady Linnea wore her public expression of refinement and disdain, but Gemma could see the noble lady was unhappy by the way she clenched her jaw.

Gemma grabbed the heat charm and the magic thimble from where they hung from a white ribbon looped her neck. (It had taken Gemma half an hour to talk the lady's maids into letting her keep them, but they had insisted Gemma take the charm and thimble off the silver thread and hang them from the ribbon instead.)

The farther they got down the aisle, the more Gemma's spirits sunk, and the slower she walked. When she was a few lengths from King Torgen, the soldiers had to nudge her to keep her moving.

When Gemma climbed the dais to join King Torgen and the priest, Gemma said, "I don't want to marry this man," to the priest.

The priest—an elderly man who was obviously under just as much threat as Gemma—sucked his neck into his shoulders and looked like he wished himself a hundred leagues away.

"Silence, Gemma Kielland," King Torgen ordered

"Or what, you will kill me? I would much prefer that," Gemma said.

Guessing by the gasp in the first few pews, her voice was audible to at least some of the attendees.

King Torgen grabbed Gemma's chin. Unlike Stil's tender touch, King Torgen gripped Gemma like a snake hinged on prey. He roughly shook her head.

"I can make you plenty wretched without killing you," King Torgen hissed.

Gemma kicked King Torgen in the shins. He shouted and pushed Gemma backwards. She would have fallen off the dais if the guards hadn't caught her.

"Restrain her," King Torgen growled to the guards, who set Gemma on her feet before holding her in place. "Don't just stand there, begin!" King Torgen said to the poor priest.

The priest cast an anxious look between King Torgen and Gemma. He shook his head.

"You refuse me?" King Torgen said. Gemma couldn't see his face as he loomed over the priest, but she could hear the promise of death in his voice.

Gemma sighed. "Go ahead," she said.

The priest, who had shrunk a foot, looked to her.

"I know you cannot help it. Go ahead," she repeated.

The priest squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. “We are gathered here today for a…glorious event and occasion. The wedding of our monarch and this…lovely girl.”

The priest warbled on, but Gemma ignored his words—if she took them in, she would start panicking. She turned around so she didn’t even face the priest and King Torgen—who didn’t seem to care—and peered past her guard escort to get a glimpse of the crowd.

She saw two of the merchants she frequently bought fabric and thread from, Otto—the barkeeper of Sno Hauk—and Mrs. Hagen and her neighbor, Mrs. Nystrom. Besides the Lovlands, there were several other noble families, but no matter how carefully she looked over the crowd, she didn’t find the two faces she was looking for: her parents.

Gemma raised an eyebrow. *That shouldn’t be a surprise. They have never bothered themselves with me before. Why should they start now?*

But what was surprising was the absence of Grandmother Guri, although Gemma suspected it may be because the old woman did not want to see Gemma wed a crazed tyrant.

“—Do you, Gemma Kielland,” the priest started.

“No,” Gemma said.

The priest hesitated, but continued with his speech when King Torgen glared at him.

Gemma only half listened when he did. Her heart twisted in her chest as she pictured her dark future. Almost against her will, she reached up and clasped the heat charm and thimble. “Stil,” she whispered, the name seeped with longing.

She really was cursed. She managed to save him—hopefully—but in the end she was still going to end up with an unhappy ending.

It is just as well I rebuffed him. It will make this ever-after easier to accept.

Gemma lifted her chin as the priest started his ending remarks.

“On behalf of this country—civilians and nobility,” the priest said.

This is it.

“It is with…resignation—,”

Unless King Torgen chokes on a fishbone, I am stuck with him—and whatever torture he decrees to try to force me to spin flax into gold.

“That I announce the marriage of our King Torgen—”

Gemma shut her eyes, wishing she could shut up her grieving heart just as easily. Regret knifed through her. Stil's love—phase or not—was a precious gift. Gemma understood that as she rubbed her magic thimble.

"And pronounce you husband—,"

No!

"RUMPELSTILTSKIN!" Gemma screamed, the words ripped from her throat and heart without the agreement of her mind. The thimble heated up and chimed like the smallest of goat bells, but the noise was blocked out by the smashing of glass. The gorgeous stained-glass window cracked and broke, raining glass shards like rain.

A figure in a black wool cloak with intricate silver embroidery fell with the glass, landing on the dais with a thump.

The figure stood and tilted its head. "Is your fashion sense sliding, Gemma?" the figure said with a smile. "That dress is hideous."

Gemma was glued to the ground. "…Stil?"

"You called for me?" Stil asked. His hood was still up, but his easy smile was in place as he bridged the distance between them to kiss Gemma on her cheek.

"You wretch—arrest him!" King Torgen shouted, red with rage.

"Come with me," Stil said, taking Gemma's hand. He mowed over the guards who—truth be told—were slow to reach for their weapons, even if they were surprised.

Stil and Gemma ran down the aisle, hurrying for the back door.

As if she could silence herself no longer, Lady Linnea leapt to her feet. "RUN, Gemma!" she shouted.

"Open the doors," Jentine—Lady Lovland's lady's maid—called.

"Run, lass," Otto echoed, his voice booming in the cathedral. Soon, a number of people stood and shouted encouragement.

King Torgen roared and rampaged down the aisle after Gemma and Stil.

Gemma tripped and almost fell when she glanced over her shoulder and saw her *mother*—using the cane Grandmother Guri usually carried—whack King Torgen on the head so hard, the wood cracked.

"Never. Again!" her mother shouted, still hitting King Torgen. "You won't get my daughter! This time I'll stop you!"

Gemma gaped as Stil helped her stand while other villages moved to help Gemma's mother.

“Don’t stand there like a stork, my girl. Get moving!” Grandmother Guri shouted from inside a pew.

Gemma regained her balance and raced the remaining distance, gripping Stil’s hand.

“Stil, what on earth are we doing?” Gemma said as the doors opened. They had to slow down to pick their way across the icy steps.

“I have a hunch,” Stil said as they cleared the steps and ran across the courtyard. The wind howled and pulled on Gemma’s terrible dress.

“A hunch,” Gemma repeated.

“Yes,” Stil said when they reached the far end of the courtyard. Instead of running into the village to lose the guards, Stil turned around and stood his ground.

“And what hunch would that be?” Gemma asked, her voice was calm with a ring of ire to it.

“That the Snow Queen will care for her own,” Stil said, rummaging through his cloak. “SHINE!” He shouted. At the top of the church tower, a cluster of starfire prisms burst into brilliance, casting as much light as the noon sun.

Up on the lone tower of the castle, another bundle of starfires ignited, glowing like a comet.

At the gate of Ostfold, another bunch of prisms exploded in light. The city glowed like a radiant jewel, lit from the three different points.

As Gemma—and the townsfolk who waiting in the courtyard—gazed slack-jawed at the light, Stil threw a fistful of snowflakes into air. “Spread,” he ordered.

Obeying his order, a gust of wind carried the paper snowflakes into the air. When they disappeared, it started to snow. A snow cloud formed above the city, and a twin cloud formed at the base of the mountains behind the palace—specifically Fresler’s Helm.

The snow started to fall in thick flakes and at a greater pace when King Torgen finally struggled out of the crowd in the cathedral.

“Guards, ARREST THEM! Kill the man!” King Torgen ordered, pointing a finger at Stil and Gemma.

The guards behind King Torgen were motionless.

King Torgen twisted around. “MOVE!” he shouted, spittle flying from his lips. “Or I shall have your families slaughtered for your insolence!”

More guards entered the courtyard, streaming from the palace until they lined the sides of the courtyard.

“Seize them!” King Torgen shouted to the newcomers.

None of the guards moved.

“You refuse? You are traitors! You will all suffer!” King Torgen shouted.

“Guards of Ostfold and Verglas, stand down,” Prince Toril ordered, emerging from the cathedral.

In a well-practiced movement, the guards sheathed their swords or reversed their hold on their spears and jabbed the tips into the ground.

King Torgen whipped around. “You rebel against me, son?” he sneered. “You wouldn’t. You haven’t the strength or the power.”

Prince Toril clenched his jaw and tucked his head.

“You are wrong, My Lord,” Lady Linnea said, joining the prince at the doorway. Her voice was elegant and frosty. “Prince Toril has plenty of power; he has merely exercised *restraint* out of his love for you.”

“You, you have been whispering into his ear, *snake*,” King Torgen said, glaring at Lady Linnea. “I will remember your face!”

“You have gone too far, King Torgen,” Stil said, removing his hood.

Folk gasped and murmured amongst each other, standing on their tip toes to peer past the soldiers and get a glimpse of Stil’s oddly-colored eyes.

“And what claim do *you* have to know this,” King Torgen glared.

“As a craftmage rank Grandmaster, I claim the heritage of the Snow Queen, as all magic users can,” Stil said. “I have seen your land, and I have walked its borders. While the Snow Queen’s magic guards your country, the people have languished under your rule. You kill without restraint and persecute any who displease you or stand against you. But no more.”

“And what can you do to stop me?” King Torgen roared with mad laughter. “You cannot kill me, or you will be hunted like a dog by your fellow mages!” he said in delight.

“I will not have to dirty my hands with your blood,” Stil said, his musical voice ringing across the courtyard. “The Snow Queen will do it for me.”

King Torgen stopped laughing. “What?”

“Did you *really* think she wouldn’t consider that the next threat to Verglas might not come from outside its borders, but from the blood of her own family?” Stil said, a harsh half smile crossing his lips.

“What do you mean?” King Torgen demanded.

“You should have learned from your Snow Queen, King Torgen. You should have known better than to touch the beloved of a *mage*,” Stil said.

“You can do nothing,” King Torgen said. All traces of amusement and laughter were gone, and he glowered like the hellhound or Hunter had, with evil and bitterness.

“We shall see,” Stil said, his cloak billowing in the raging wind of the snowstorm. He raised a hand into the air and shouted over the wind.

“I, mage Rumpelstiltskin—Grandmaster craftmage—speak a vow to protect Gemma Kielland, civilian of Ostfold, whose very *life* is in danger through the actions of King Torgen,” Stil shouted. “Gemma Kielland is the love of my life and the light in my soul. And I will put forth every bit of my magic to shield and protect her, whether the cost be my life or limbs, until my heart beats its last!” Stil shouted.

As he spoke, a mountain—Fresler’s Helm—started to rumble. In the palace, the windows of the throne room started to frost over, and the second, beautiful throne started to glow.

“My vow begins *now*, as she has been abused, threatened, and blackmailed, in her own homeland—the place that should be a safe haven!” Stil said, his voice like a trumpet in the rage of the storm.

The snow shifted from soft and fluffy to stinging bits of ice as the wind howled and swirled.

“I will have you *killed*!” King Torgen yelled.

Stil shook his head, his blue eyes hypnotic. “No, you won’t,” he said.

The ground of the courtyard frosted over, and ice formed on King Torgen’s boots.

“Wha-what?” King Torgen said, tottering several steps to shake the ice off. “What villainy are you doing? Black magic is not tolerated in Verglas! This will be your end! You will die for attacking a monarch!”

“I am doing nothing, Oh King,” Stil said, his expression hard.

King Torgen looked down and shouted in fright when he realized his boots were iced over. He tried to move, but he was frozen to the ground. He twisted, his feverish eyes searching. “Toril, help me, son! Save me!”

“You have wrought your future. It is time you faced the consequences, Father,” Toril said, his voice pained. “I am sorry, if I had stopped you sooner…”

“YOU WRETCH!” King Torgen shouted as the ice crawled up his legs. “You ungrateful fiend! I should have cast you out—no, I should have culled you when I knew what a sop you were! Help me, I order it!”

Some folk shielded their eyes; others clamped their hands over their ears as the protective ice magic left behind by the Snow Queen spread on King Torgen, freezing him and clamping him into place.

“You cannot do this. I AM KING!” King Torgen shouted.

“Not anymore,” Stil said.

“NO!” King Torgen shouted, before the ice encased his face, and he was frozen solid, a statue of ice.

Gemma stared at the ice husk of King Torgen. Sheer stubbornness kept her from collapsing on her knees, as many civilians, nobles, and even guards, did.

Instead, Gemma looked to Stil, her icy eyes wide.

“It had to be done, Gemma,” Stil said, moving to slide his arms around her.

“Did it?” Gemma asked.

Stil tipped his head until their foreheads touched. “As much as it pains me to ever see a life taken, yes. Most people are good. But there are some so twisted and dark that they will never see the light again.”

“Like King Torgen,” Gemma said.

“Like King Torgen,” Stil agreed. “Eventually, he would have destroyed Verglas.”

“I know,” Gemma whispered. “And I hated him. But…he loved his wife.”

“You can be happy, and relieved, and still pity him,” Stil said, brushing Gemma’s cheek with warm fingers. “It’s one of the things I love about you. You will dislike a person, but your heart still breaks for them. I treasure that.”

“Thank you for coming back for me,” Gemma said.

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry for all the…unfeeling things I said.”

“You were trying to protect yourself. Besides, I know you are worth fighting for,” Stil said, sliding his cheek against hers so the exhale of his

rich chuckle tickled Gemma's ear.

"Stil, I…"

"Yes?"

Gemma swallowed. She had to tell Stil. She *owed* it to him! "I—,"

"I knew it!"

Gemma blinked and turned her head, disengaging from Stil's touch. "What?" she said to Lady Linnea, the interrupter.

Stil groaned and dropped his head into Gemma's shoulder where he growled for a moment.

"I *knew* your lover was helping you!" Lady Linnea said with a smug smile.

"But he is a mage," Gemma said.

"He is still your lover!" Lady Linnea said, folding her arms across her chest and squinting at Stil, who still had his head buried in the puffy fabric on Gemma's shoulder. "I guess he'll do."

"You *guess*? After what he just did?" Gemma asked, surprised by Lady Linnea's begrudging appraisal.

"Yes, he does make a good presentation. But he seems like a whiner," Lady Linnea said.

Stil finally pulled his head from Gemma's shoulder and tilted his head to touch Gemma's as he addressed Lady Linnea. "Do you have any idea how I have fought for her?"

"Do you really think I *happened* to interrupt?" Lady Linnea asked.

"I've never been fond of nobility," Stil said.

"And I've never liked mages," Lady Linnea said.

"Stop it. Both of you," Gemma said. "My Lady, I don't understand the sudden dislike. You were rooting for my supposed lover since the first night of spinning."

"That was before I knew he was a mage," Lady Linnea said.

"But I told you!" Gemma said at the same time Stil said, "So?"

"As a *mage*, he is sure to hustle you away and rip you from Verglas—and from me," Lady Linnea said, turning her sad, blue eyes to Gemma.

Gemma stepped out of Stil's arms so she could embrace Lady Linnea. "No matter our futures, My Lady, you will be a companion of my heart," she said, her voice fierce. "I will *always* care for you."

Lady Linnea sniffed. "And I will always care for you."

Stil politely looked away as the two girls cried and smiled together.

“I suppose you won’t go away forever. You love this frozen wasteland too much,” Lady Linnea wryly smiled as she wiped a tear away.

“I do,” Gemma admitted. She lifted her gaze to look to Prince Toril, who was standing in front of the ice statue that was his father. His expression was filled with regret and sadness. “I wonder what will happen next.”

“He will need help,” Lady Linnea said.

“What he needs is an army of scholars to fill that empty mind of his,” Stil said.

“You are sinking even further in my esteem, craftmage,” Lady Linnea tightly said.

Gemma placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Can’t you aid him?”

“I want to see the world, Gemma.”

“But if he asked, would you sacrifice it all?” Gemma asked.

Lady Linnea looked back to the crestfallen prince. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “If you’ll excuse me,” she said. She squared her shoulders and crossed the courtyard. “Long live King Toril,” Linnea called. Her voice was strong in a sea of whispers and uncertainty.

Toril twisted around, his eyes wide in surprise.

“Long live King Toril,” Linnea repeated.

“Long Live King Toril!” some of the civilians shouted with her.

People began to clap; guards banged their spears on the ground in a solid beat, and the nobles gave sweeping bows and curtseys to their new monarch.

“She is *quite* smitten with him,” Stil observed.

“Painfully so,” Gemma agreed, barely audible above the cheers and shouts of the crowd as Verglas welcomed its new King.

Chapter 18

By the time night fell, both much and little had changed.

Dispatch riders were sent out to inform all of Verglas; Gemma was able to change into one of her dresses—courtesy of Grandmother Guri who delivered the dark blue dress to her at the palace—and everyone had acknowledged, in as few words as possible, that they were overjoyed with King Torgen's passing.

The unexpected problem was who would rule.

"It's out of the question," Gemma said, fussing with her cloak. (Servants caught her trying to sneak out after changing and hauled her back into the palace.)

"It is not," Prince Toril said. "My Father meant to marry you, and he very nearly did. It is within your rights to be the ruler of Verglas. I will step aside for you."

Gemma pushed her reclaimed snow-blue hair-band up her forehead. "My Lord—My Lords," she said, adjusting her stance so she addressed Prince Toril and the various lords and statesmen rallied around him. "It is an inappropriate idea," she said, catching sight of Stil at the very back of the throne room. "I never actually married King Torgen, nor did I want to. I am not royal, and I am not learned. I am a seamstress, not a monarch."

"But you—," Prince Toril started.

"I have on good authority that Prince Toril is capable as a leader, and I hold him in the highest esteem," Gemma said. "As heir to the throne, it is Prince Toril who should rule Verglas."

Prince Toril's expression was pinched. "My father wronged you, Miss Kielland. I wish to correct it."

"I do *not* need a kingdom to make up for a few uncomfortable weeks," Gemma wryly said. "It would only make it worse."

"I could marry you," Prince Toril said.

"*What*?" Stil said in the back of the room, which promptly dropped several degrees.

Annoyed by the prince's thickheaded actions, Gemma flattened her eyebrows, disgruntled. *He's trying, I suppose, in his own, bumbling way.*

Linnea better teach him better, or he is going to be swindled by every country surrounding us.

"My Lord," Gemma firmly said. "*Nothing* about that arrangement would please either of us."

"Is there anything I can give you?" Prince Toril argued. "If not a crown, perhaps gold? We have quite a bit now…since…you…spun it," Prince Toril said, crestfallen as he made the connection.

Gemma's lips quirked in an amused curve. "Gold is a silly thing, My Lord. It is easily spent or lost and can bring forth the darkness in people. It is a person's actions that have real value. If you wish to make amends for your father's reign, I ask that you would reinstate the market in the Ostfold village square and allow the ambassadors to return to their foreign posts."

Prince Toril looked relieved. "I shall do that," he agreed.

Gemma almost felt bad about the request—the prince probably didn't know or realize Lady Linnea was the daughter of the ambassador to Loire—but she owed it to Linnea to open the door for her.

"Thank you, My Lord. If that is all?" Gemma said, curtsying.

"It is. Thank you, Miss Kielland."

Gemma curtseyed again before she fled.

Still followed her out of the throne room and was quiet as Gemma soaked in the sanctuary of the poorly-lit hallway.

"What will you do next?" Stil asked.

"I don't know," Gemma said, struggling to stay upright in a world swiftly changing. The idea of returning to Lovland manor was not pleasing after her exit from it, though she knew Lady Linnea and Lady Lovland would welcome her back.

She would *not* return to her parents' mill, even though her mother had helped her earlier, it wouldn't be wise. Her heart was softened enough to mend her relationship with her mother, but living with her would undo all her newfound good will. Perhaps she could stay with Grandmother Guri?

"If you like, you could stay with Angelique and me in my camp, for tonight at least," Stil said, edging up behind Gemma.

Gemma smiled at the craftmage. "That would be nice," she admitted, before frowning. "Angelique? She's here?"

"Yes. I managed to call her back. She is why we were able to arrive in time," Stil admitted, extending his hand.

“Pegasus?” Gemma said, hesitating before she took Stil’s hand and allowed him to lead her.

“Yes. I owe her for more than that, though. She summoned up the snow storm—I could never have done it without her. I wanted to get the Snow Queen’s magic riled, and the fastest way I know of is to add to the ice and snow in this country.”

“Were the starfires a signal to her?”

“Yes. I had her stationed at the base of Fresler’s Helm. Communicating with her would not be easy with all I needed to do.”

“Who started the starfires at the palace and city gate?”

“They said their names were Rudd and Børres,” Stil said as they strolled down the corridors of the palace.

Servants wove around them, carrying letters, documents, books, or food. Gemma had a feeling they weren’t supposed to let random citizens wander the halls, but after the public spectacle Stil put on with King Torgen, it was unlikely anyone in Ostfold didn’t recognize Gemma—even without the hideous dress.

“Ah, yes,” Gemma said, a fond smile flickering on her face. “My dungeon guards.”

“It seems your sense of sacrifice has earned you a few friends,” Stil said, leading the way outside.

When the brisk wind hit her, Gemma shivered and let go of Stil’s hand to pull her cloak closer.

“This way,” Stil called, trudging through the snow, moving towards Lake Sno.

“How is your shoulder?” Gemma asked.

“It’s fine. It aches a little, but it will pass. Angelique used some of her healing magic on me before we left for Ostfold,” Stil said. “Although that does remind me,” he said, pointing to the forest.

Standing at the edge of the forest was the white lupine with black paws and black facial markings. When the canine saw Gemma, its curled tail wagged.

“It followed you?” Gemma asked.

“No, it followed you. It was already here, sniffing outside the palace walls when we arrived this morning,” Stil confirmed.

“But it is a hellhound, and it crossed the border?” Gemma said, observing the creature.

“Whatever it is, it’s not a hellhound anymore,” Stil said. “It glows like a firefly in the middle of the night.”

“Do you think it was the starfire it swallowed?” Gemma asked. “And when it passes through its system, it will go back to being a hellhound?”

“No. Whatever you did was permanent. I haven’t seen a creature like it—and neither has Angelique. Hellhounds are exclusively used by practitioners of dark magic. By claiming it with light, you have forged a new kind of canine,” Stil said as they hiked past the creature.

Gemma hesitated before she wriggled her fingers at the dog.

The white furred animal happily yipped and broke away from the trees, its tail twirling wildly as it followed Gemma and Stil.

Stil and Gemma walked the shores of Lake Snow—the unusual dog following them. When they rounded a bend of the lake, Gemma saw the familiar tent and donkey waiting.

Angelique was outside, leading a bare-backed Pegasus, who gleamed like the patches of night sky that could be seen through breaks in the clouds.

“Gemma,” Angelique said, a smile blooming on her lovely face. “I am so glad you are safe.”

“As am I. Thank you for all you have done to help me.”

Angelique laughed. “It was no trouble at all. It was a pleasure, actually. It is relieving to deliver happiness in a time like this,” she said, patting her mount.

“Pricker Patch? When did he get here?” Stil asked, rubbing the donkey’s face.

“Not over an hour ago. He was quite unhappy and put out. I don’t think he appreciated being left behind,” Angelique said.

“He couldn’t have possibly kept up with Pegasus, and we left him with a farmer who promised to feed him. One would have thought it was the ideal situation for such a disagreeable animal,” Stil said as the donkey—to Gemma’s shock—tilted his head forward the tiniest degree to lean into Stil’s hand.

“Perhaps,” Angelique said. She glanced between Stil and Gemma before adding, “If you will excuse me, I need to set Pegasus loose for the night. He needs to stretch.”

“Certainly,” Gemma said, slightly confused by Angelique’s language. “Enjoy?”

The enchantress raised her hand in acknowledgment and walked off, leading Pegasus away from the camp.

“Let’s get out of this wind,” Stil said, giving Pricker Patch a final scratch before motioning to the tent. Gemma followed him in, nearly tripping when the white lupine dove in front of her to wriggle its way inside.

“You…,” Gemma said to the dog.

The white canine gave Gemma a doggy smile and scampered behind a settee. He poked his head out from behind it, his triangular ears pricked.

“Leave him. He’ll be fine,” Stil said, taking off his cape. His hair was short, and his clothes were unusually plain—black boots with tan cotton pants and a loose, royal blue shirt.

“Are you sure? He is a wild animal. He—,”

“Gemma.”

Gemma slowly raised her eyes to meet Stil’s gaze.

“We need to talk,” the craftmage said.

“Yes,” Gemma agreed, shedding her cape.

“Why didn’t you run?”

“Why?” Gemma repeated.

“Yes.”

Gemma pursed her lips. “I tried to run. Servants tracked me down and dragged me back. I think Lady Linnea underestimates Prince—excuse me—King Toril’s backbone—,”

“That’s not what I meant,” Stil said, his voice patient as he spoke over her. “I was referring to the rider, and to when the soldiers found us. I told you to run.”

Gemma sat in a settee and felt awkward. *Why do I feel awkward? I know he loves me. I should tell him that I lov—no, maybe not*.

“Gemma,” Stil said, crouching down in front of her.

The look in Stil’s uniquely beautiful eyes tore the words from Gemma’s mouth. “Because I love you,” she hiccupped.

Stil and Gemma stared at each other, both a little shocked.

“I didn’t mean to say that,” Gemma said, sliding down the settee and moving across the room.

“You didn’t mean to say it, or you didn’t mean it?” Stil asked, gliding after Gemma with an infuriating amount of elegance.

“Let’s make matters simple and pretend I didn’t say it,” Gemma said.

“No,” Stil said.

Gemma sighed. “I didn’t run from the rider because I couldn’t leave you like that. When I finally got my head on straight, I realized that we were so busy *countering* him that we weren’t bothering to take advantage of his greatest weakness,” Gemma said. “Although, I did not know the light would have such an effect on the hellhound,” she added, glancing at the white lupine sniffing her shoes.

“I can understand that. You thought to use something I see as only a trinket as an ultimate weapon. Well done,” Stil said. “So, about love.”

“As for the soldiers, it made the most sense. Obviously,” Gemma stiffly said.

“So, about love,” Stil repeated.

Gemma strode back to the settee. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I find it amusing that a hellhound, a mad king, and the threat of death won’t make you bat an eye, but mentioning love makes you lose your eternal serenity.”

Gemma narrowed icy eyes at Stil. “I am perfectly fine—STOP IT,” she barked when Stil reached out to touch her cheek.

Stil’s lips quirked in the slightest smile. “Gemma,” he said, his voice gentle. “You can trust me. I’m not going to let you go. That is not to say that I will not disappoint you in the future or make you glare at me frequently, but I will never stop loving you.”

“You can’t know that,” Gemma said.

“Do you ever wonder if your Lady Linnea will stop your friendship?” Stil asked.

“No.”

“How am I any different from her?”

“Would you like me to list the differences alphabetically or numerically?”

“No, I mean—what is different about her that would have you readily believe her love?”

“I can’t think of anything,” Gemma admitted.

“Then why won’t you believe me?”

“It just doesn’t seem possible…or plausible.”

“Why? You are an incredible woman.”

“You’re a mage, wealthy, and handsome, and I—,”

Stil held up a hand. “Wait, you think I’m handsome?”

Gemma paused. “I…”

“So you *did* notice my stylish hair and charming good looks. I was starting to grow worried,” Stil preened.

“Stylish is a broad term.”

“Why are you even fighting this?”

“Because you already have the ego of a peacock.”

“No, no, not my stunning looks—”

“I never said stunning.”

“—I was referring to your affection for me.”

Gemma blinked, disarmed by the direct question. “What?”

“It seems to me like you *don’t* want me to love you, even though you just admitted you feel the same way I do. Why?”

“I find it hard to believe in people,” Gemma said.

“With your background, I can understand that, but I’ve never done anything to make you doubt me,” Stil said, edging towards Gemma as if she were an easily frightened deer. “I have come to your rescue whenever you need me. I won’t let you fall,” Stil promised.

“I’m afraid,” Gemma whispered.

“Of me?” Stil asked, resting his arms on her shoulders.

“No,” Gemma said as Stil pulled her in to hold her. “I don’t know. It’s so confusing, and that is unacceptable,” she said, glaring into Stil’s shirt.

Stil chuckled. “I’m afraid, too,” he said.

“Of what?”

“I’m afraid something will happen, and you’ll feel the need to run off and sacrifice yourself,” he dryly said. “I’m afraid you will keep pushing me away, and that I’ll never get to see that firstborn child.”

“*Stil*,” Gemma hissed.

“But most of all, I’m afraid you will never let me love you. I choose you, Gemma. I love your loyalty, your practicality, and those rare smiles you will occasionally shed. I love *you*. Please, let that be enough,” Stil whispered in Gemma’s ear.

Gemma moved her arms to embrace him back. They stood together for a few silent moments that seemed to stretch on for ages.

“And I love you,” Gemma finally admitted, her shoulders hunching in defeat.

“You sound so enthused,” Stil said.

Gemma gave Stil a wan smile.

“Gemma, I *love* you,” Stil repeated.

Gemma raised an eyebrow, wondering at the response, when Stil abruptly kissed her on the lips.

Although the movement was sudden, the feeling behind Stil’s kiss was anything but. It was passionate and warmer than the heat charm. It reminded Gemma of the starfires at their most brilliant—overwhelming but beautiful.

They parted when the white canine wriggled its way between them, making the pair chuckle.

“What now?” Gemma asked as Stil adjusted his hold on her waist to bring her closer to him.

“Loire? I still need to meet with Prince Severin and Princess Elle.” Stil said.

Gemma thought for a moment and shook her head. “I can’t leave Verglas yet.”

“Why not?” Stil asked, stiffening.

“Lady Linnea. I can’t leave her like this.”

“Won’t she be coming to Loire as well?” Stil asked.

“Maybe…but I don’t think that’s what she really wants,” Gemma said.

“I see,” Stil said. He kissed Gemma’s lower jaw. “Is there nothing I can say that will change your mind?”

“Does it bother you that much?” Gemma asked.

“I will miss you fiercely, but I won’t begrudge you this time. I only wish I could stay with you,” Stil said.

“You can’t?” Gemma asked.

“The fight against darkness,” Stil sighed. “I have to leave tomorrow with Angelique. It is cruel to part from you so soon, but I’m afraid I don’t have a choice.”

“I trust you,” Gemma said.

“And I will wait for you. When can I return for you?” Stil asked, pulling Gemma closer.

“In a year?”

“A month.”

“Eight months, no less.”

“A month and a day.”

The pair bantered for some time before they finally agreed that Stil would come for Gemma in early summer, or sooner if she wrote to him.

"I feel I should have you negotiate with merchants for any purchases I need. Arguing with you is tiresome," Gemma frowned.

"Good," Stil said, pressing his cheek to Gemma's head. "I will miss you," he repeated.

"I'm sure that lock of my hair you have tucked away somewhere will aid the pain in your heart," Gemma dryly said.

"I was wondering if you would pick up on that," Stil said.

"Mmhmm. There wasn't really a price to your magic, was there?"

"There is, but only for pieces of magic I deliberately perform for a person. The thimble wouldn't have counted," Stil admitted.

"You *are* a hack," Gemma said.

"It could be worse. I could have made you play the question game with me."

Gemma raised her eyebrows in an expression of apathy, but she couldn't help but laugh when Stil soundly kissed her again.

The pair settled on the settee and laughed and chatted late into the night, petting the transformed hellhound and enjoying each other's presence. (They did stop to hold a brief celebration when Angelique returned and Stil told the enchantress in training that he finally won Gemma over.)

Gemma rested her head on Stil's chest and listened to his heartbeat. "You have to go tomorrow," she said.

"I know."

"I wish you didn't."

Stil kissed the top of Gemma's head. "Me too, Gemma. Me too."

Chapter 19

In spring, the wedding all of Verglas had waited for was *finally* held.

The bride was beautiful, dressed in a gorgeous white dress—the likes of which had never been seen before. The groom was a dashing figure, waiting patiently for his bride with a smile as she walked down the aisle of the same cathedral that, months ago, had witnessed a battle.

The crowd gathered on this spring day was very different from those gathered for King Torgen's and Gemma's near-wedding. Today, the witnesses wore smiles and waved small replicas of the Verglas flag. The citizens of Ostfold were particularly overjoyed, and they cheered and hollered with abandon as the bride joined the groom on the dais.

"Stick a quill in my head and call me a rooster, but that savage miss of yours looks right beautiful today. You did fine work on that dress of hers," Grandmother Guri said, elbowing Gemma and speaking loudly to be heard over the joyous cheers of their fellow civilians.

"Lady Linnea has always been beautiful," Gemma loyally said, watching her close friend curtsey to the priest and her future husband—King Toril.

"Perhaps, but she doesn't look so false," Grandmother Guri agreed, "like her expression is carved from marble."

"Yes," Gemma said, smiling fondly as her eyes rested on the beautiful but serviceable dagger strapped to Lady Linnea's waist.

In the middle of winter, after he was crowned King and had ruled for a little time alone, King Toril—to the shock of no civilians and all Verglas nobles—asked Lady Linnea to marry him. Lady Linnea put aside all of her dreams of meeting military leaders and studying foreign armies to say yes, only to be surprised when King Toril modestly asked *her* to take charge of the Verglas military once they were married—which would, of course, mean she would need to travel and observe what other countries were doing and, most importantly, answer the summons of nations from the Commanding General of Loire, Prince Severin.

That particular request shocked everyone—except for those who lived near Grandmother Guri and pressed close to the walls of her house when,

for one week straight, King Toril called upon the legendary seamstress, Gemma Kielland, and sought her advice.

He is one of the few men who could understand her, and she will make his reign even better, Gemma thought, smiling at the pair.

"I wasn't sure the bumpkin could tame her, but he managed," Grandmother Guri said, as if she could hear Gemma's thoughts.

"Yes," Gemma agreed, sitting down when the priest motioned for the congregation to be seated.

Gemma and Grandmother Guri were separated from the crowd, seated in chairs of honor near the base of the dais rather than the pews. Since Stil's public vow, Gemma had become something of a local legend, known as the girl who brought about King Torgen's demise.

Lady Linnea used the excuse to give Gemma special treatment, but truth be told, Gemma wished everyone wouldn't treat her so reverently. She missed haggling with the merchants—who would now give her whatever price she asked for cloth—and holding dislikable people, like Malfrid and Mrs. Hagen, in distaste. (Mrs. Hagen hadn't dared to criticize her chosen occupation since her return to Ostfold society, and Malfrid immediately married a farmer and moved away when the dust settled from Gemma's adventures.)

But most of all, she missed Stil.

She wished she could talk to him about fine craftsmanship and show him her work on Lady Linnea's wedding dress. She missed his handsome smiles and even his stupid, wretched, question game.

"We are gathered here today for a beautiful event and occasion: the wedding of our monarch, King Toril, to the honorable Lady Linnea Lovland," the priest said when the cathedral had quieted enough that his squeaky voice could be heard.

His declaration brought about more cheers, and he was unable to continue as the civilians whistled and rejoiced.

The priest bore it well, smiling and folding his hands as he waited.

Before this winter, we have had precious little to celebrate, Gemma thought as she, too, clapped. *But it is different now.*

"Verglas is coming back, my girl," Grandmother Guri said, her voice just above a whisper.

"Why do you say that?" Gemma asked.

“You can feel it in the air. It’s crisp and clean—finally. People smile more—which is a scary sight in some cases. No one fears to stick out anymore, and there’s *laughter*. Yep, everything is right again. And your lady up there will make sure bumpkin keeps it that way,” Grandmother Guri nodded.

If anyone deserved to call Toril bumpkin, it was Grandmother Guri. When the young king called on Gemma to ask for advice about Lady Linnea, Grandmother Guri had smacked the monarch upside the head a number of times when he was particularly slow to understand a point about the battle-crazed lady.

“So, that means you can finally leave with that mage of yours,” Grandmother Guri added.

Gemma gaped at the elderly woman. The fact that they were witnessing the marriage of their monarch and Gemma’s close companion was forgotten. “*What* are you talking about?” Gemma hissed.

“You’re sighing all the time and looking off into space like Jo-Jo when she’s about to urp up her cud. You miss your mage, and that’s fine. Now things have settled here; you’ve got your barbaric lady taken care of, and there’s nothing left for you to do. You can go,” Grandmother Guri whispered.

“How did you…?”

“My girl, all of Ostfold was treated to a public performance of your love with that man. You can’t think I didn’t know—that everyone in *town* doesn’t know.”

Gemma adjusted her posture in her chair and fixed her gaze on Lady Linnea and King Toril, ignoring the astute observations of Grandmother Guri.

Within a few minutes, the ceremony was over.

“On behalf of this country—civilians and nobility—it is with great joy that I announce the marriage of our King Toril to Lady Linnea!” the priest said. Even he could not contain his enthusiasm as he raised his hands in the air.

Church bells clanged, and everyone in the cathedral roared so much the floor vibrated. The citizens who could not cram their way into the church with the nobles cheered outside. When the doors opened up, Gemma could see that they threw rice and flower petals.

King Toril and Lady Linnea—soon to be Queen Linnea once the royal couple arrived at the palace for her crowning—swept down the aisle. Their faces were bright with happiness, and they laughed and clasped hands as they emerged from the cathedral and into the street.

Verglas had good, valiant monarchs once again.

“Thank you so much for making my dress, Gemma,” Queen Linnea said, embracing Gemma when she caught her sneaking towards a table of drinks.

“It was my pleasure, My Lady,” Gemma smiled.

Queen Linnea beamed and glanced over her shoulder at King Toril, who was seated at their table, laughing with one of his advisors.

The wedding feast was barely halfway over, and everyone was still exuberant and filled with joy and laughter. Well-wishers were lined up out the door, hoping to congratulate their king and new queen.

“I know I asked you right after I agreed to marry him, but, what do you think of Toril?” Queen Linnea asked, shyly looking at Gemma from under her eyelashes.

“I think he’s a gallant gentleman who loves you very much, and I know the two of you will be wonderful rulers,” Gemma said.

“Do you really think so?” Queen Linnea asked.

Gemma raised an eyebrow. “Have I lied to you before, My Lady?”

“I know, I’m just so *happy*. I can’t believe it!” Queen Linnea laughed, squeezing Gemma in another embrace that was so tight Gemma’s spine cracked.

“You deserve this happiness.”

“Thank you, Gemma. No, I mean it,” Queen Linnea said when Gemma started to curtsey. “None of this would have happened—none of this would have been *possible* without you.” The new queen hesitated, her hand lingering on her dagger. “I know I asked you to stay with me before this all began.”

Gemma nodded in acknowledgment.

“I realize now that’s not possible,” Queen Linnea continued as she shifted her gaze to her husband. “I don’t have the right to stand between you and that *mage*,” she said, her voice dripping with disdain as she

mentioned Stil. “And I will miss you terribly, *terribly* much. When he comes to take you away, you must promise to write!”

“My Lady, Stil is busy aiding Prince Severin and his allies. In all likelihood, *you* will see him before I do when you answer Prince Severin’s summons,” Gemma soothed.

Queen Linnea shook her head. “Gemma, the man faced down a *monarch* and a *country* for you. The truth is, as soon as he thinks Verglas will not mind your absence as much, he’s going to come for you,” she said, speaking the secret desires of Gemma’s heart.

Gemma smiled. “Perhaps,” she said. “But it is your wedding feast—a time to rejoice.”

“I know, I know,” Queen Linnea sighed, looking down to adjust the skirt of her dress. When she looked up, her eyes landed on King Toril, and she smiled again. She turned to look at Gemma, her smile still in place. “All I wanted to say is that…I understand. I understand why you will leave, and whenever you come back, I will put aside everything—even the *army*—to welcome you home.”

“Thank you, My Lady,” Gemma said, deeply touched by her friend’s words.

“Linnea,” Toril called.

“Right. I should return to the rest of the guests. Enjoy the food—take some back for the furball!” Queen Linnea called over her shoulder as she headed for her husband, her magnificent dress dragging behind her.

Gemma shook her head at her friend’s retreat and turned herself in the direction of her table. Grandmother Guri was holding court with a number of villager ladies. They were eagerly swapping gossip and stories as they crowded around the table that was specially prepared for Gemma, munching on dried fruit and krumkake—thin cake rolls filled with whipped cream. A passing villager bowed to Gemma as he would to royalty, and a servant bearing a platter mimicked the motion when she noticed Gemma.

The heat of the hall beat on Gemma’s shoulders like a giant, and all the laughter and shouts of celebration made her head throb. She cautiously inspected her surroundings to make sure she was not being watched before she slipped through a servant door.

Her head eased the instant she closed the door behind her, but Gemma walked on, navigating her way through the palace—which she now knew

quite well. She found her way to the courtyard and gardens that overlooked Lake Sno and breathed in the cool, spring air.

The tranquility of the lake and the silence of the gardens soothed Gemma.

When a cold, wet nose bumped her hand, Gemma did not scream in surprise, but smiled. “Sorry, Hvit. I didn’t bring you anything,” she said, kneeling down to run her hands through the luxurious fur of her hellhound-turned-guardian.

The wolfish creature panted happily, his tongue hanging out as he twirled his curled tail. Somehow, the canine always knew where Gemma was and found her—even if she locked him in Grandmother Guri’s cottage. (Thank goodness Jo-Jo was even less impressed with Hvit than she was with Grandmother Guri!)

“It’s finally settled,” Gemma said, resting her head on her companion’s shoulder. She was sure to get white hair all over her clothes, but she didn’t care. With King Toril properly crowned and Lady Linnea married, there was little else Gemma had left to see to in Verglas. She was free. Free to travel and, hopefully, find Stil.

She missed him so much, even though they hadn’t been together long. When she closed her eyes, she could still see the way his blue eyes gleamed when he teased her. Winter in Verglas was beautiful as usual, but Gemma was surprised by how *deeply* she felt Stil’s absence. It was like a piece of her left with him.

Hvit went completely still for a moment—going so far as to collect his tongue into his mouth. Then his nose twitched, and he returned to his happy pants, smearing his cold nose in Gemma’s ears.

“Gemma.”

Perhaps Gemma missed Stil too much. She could have sworn she heard his rich, melodic voice.

“*Gemma*.”

Gemma peered over Hvit.

Stil was standing just in reach of the torchlight, the silver embroidery on his cape gleaming. His hood was pushed down, and his unusual eyes were ringed by dark circles, but he was whole, and healthy, and he was *here*.

Gemma couldn’t say a word. She scrambled to her feet and threw herself at the craftmage, clinging to him as the tears fell. Stil chuckled and

slid his arms around Gemma. “I know I’m early, but I believe the deal was you would not leave until you saw Linnea happy?” he said teasingly, resting his head on Gemma’s.

“You’re here,” Gemma whispered, her heart singing with joy.

“Of course,” Stil said.

When Gemma finally looked up at him, Stil slid a hand under her jaw and kissed her long and passionately. After a minute, he pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. “Although I must admit, a season was too long to be away from you. Let’s not do this again.”

“Agreed,” Gemma said, sagging in Stil’s arms. It was like coming home.

He smelled of metal and forges, but also of pine trees and the outdoors. He really was here!

“I have come to take you away,” Stil whispered in Gemma’s ear. “This time…will you come?”

Gemma smiled—not a small one or soft one, but a rare smile. A wide smile that lit up her face and threatened to steal all of her good sense. “Yes,” she said.

“Finally,” Stil said, kissing her again.

The couple staggered when Hvit playfully bit on and pulled Stil’s cloak. The craftmage released Gemma long enough to pet the mischievous lupine before picking Gemma up and twirling her around for the fun of it.

“Marry me,” Stil demanded, holding Gemma propped up.

“Yes. Will you marry me?” Gemma asked.

“Yes. We’re going to have a charmed life,” Stil decreed, setting Gemma down.

“You’re fair pleased with yourself for marrying a seamstress, aren’t you?” Gemma wryly asked.

“Only because you’re a genius,” Stil said. “One genius deserves another.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“You’ll see. We can play the question game whenever we travel—and wherever we travel.”

“Oh, joy,” Gemma said, her voice dead.

“I will have a house built for you wherever you want.”

“Verglas?”

“Depend upon it.”

“Then I will make so many cloaks and capes, you may have a different one for each occasion,” Gemma said.

“What I would *really* like is a rug,” Stil said.

“It may take me time to learn how to weave.”

“I can wait. In the meantime, I will have to hide you away. I told some of the other craftmages at Prince Severin’s summit about you, and now they all want to get their paws on you,” Stil said.

Gemma smiled at Stil, and Stil smiled at Gemma. They embraced and kissed again, breaking apart and laughing when Hvit circled them, snapping at Stil’s cloak.

On an upper balcony, Queen Linnea seethed as she watched the spectacle below. “I knew that rat wouldn’t take long to show up and spirit her away.”

“Darling?” King Toril tried.

“He’s even craftier than I am. What a snake,” Queen Linnea said.

“Linnea,” King Toril said, placing a hand on Queen Linnea’s shoulder.

“Hm?”

“She’s happy. Leave her. She has sacrificed plenty; it is her turn now,” the young king said.

Queen Linnea studied her new husband. “Your understanding of love is rapidly improving,” she said.

King Toril allowed himself a smile. “A wise lady once said to me that it takes work to build a lasting relationship. You both have done the work. Your relationship will be a lasting one. She will not forget you, Linnea, anymore than you could forget her.”

Linnea’s anger withdrew, and she smiled. “You are right. I love Gemma—no matter where she wanders in this land. I love you, and I am so happy…and so blessed.”

King Toril offered his arm. Queen Linnea took it, and the royal couple left the balcony and returned to the celebration while the Craftmage and Seamstress remained in the courtyard, talking, laughing, and loving.

Epilogue

Peder the miller was known to be a generally useless man. Even after his daughter became the savior of Verglas, was the best friend to the queen, married a craftmage, and was renown across the continent for her skill with a needle and her ability to make clothes that could take and hold spells and enchantments for ages, Peder still had a reputation as the town drunkard. The only thing that changed was he now occasionally had useful bits of information on the much-esteemed Gemma.

On any given night, one could still find him in the Sno Hauk tavern, in his usual seat at the dilapidated bar. Tonight was no different.

Peder marched into the Sno Hauk, bearing a pocket of money and, unusually so, a framed portrait that he carried with rare care.

“Alf Skeie, you lying sunk,” Peder declared, setting the portrait on the counter.

“What,” Alf said, his weasel face scrunching up with displeasure.

“You’ve been spreading rumors about my Gemma and her mage,” Peder said. As he hadn’t yet drunken anything, he could shake a finger at Alf without falling over.

“Have not,” Alf said.

“Best not lie, Alf Skeie,” Otto the barkeep said. “Not two nights ago, I heard you telling an out-of-town guest that craftmage Stil was not quite three feet tall and as ugly as a warped cabbage.”

“See? That!” Peder said.

“I said nothin’ like that,” Alf squirmed.

“The missus said you were telling tales at Sissel’s wedding. You said craftmage Stil lost a bet to the deceased King Torgen—God rest his soul,” Big Tim said, chewing on the stem of his pipe.

“No, I didn’t,” Alf said. “All I said is people look up to Gemma and her ‘mage’ husband too much. That’s all. People still sing and chirp praises for them more than our own dear king and queen. It’s a crime,” Alf protested.

“I also heard you called Gemma a stupid twit for not telling King Torgen she couldn’t spin flax to gold before the whole thing escalated,” Small Tim said.

At the back of the room, chairs scraped as four palace guards stood. Two of the guards twirled spears, and one unsheathed a sword. The only one that didn't immediately reach for a weapon strolled up to Alf.

"What did you say about Gemma Kielland?" the guard asked, looming above Alf.

"N-nothing. I didn't say nothing," Alf squeaked.

"Alf Skeie," the guard said, making Alf shrink. "I will remember your weasel face. If I hear you talking badly of our Gemma Kielland again, there will be a reckoning," he said.

Alf swallowed sharply.

"You want some help, Foss?" the sword-wielding guard asked.

"Nah, this one isn't worth it," the unarmed guard said, scowling darkly at Alf before returning to his table.

"Well, how do you like that?" Peder happily said, plopping down on his stool and popping a coin onto the counter. "Otto, a pint, if you will!"

Otto poured a drink for Peder as Big Tim and Small Tim joined the miller.

"Whatcha got there?" Small Tim asked, squinting at the painted portrait.

"My son-in-law sent it to me. It's him and Gemma," Peder proudly said after taking a swig of his beer. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Small Tim studied the painting with eagerness—planning to carry the details of it in his mind to relay to his wife.

The portrait was of Gemma and her husband—the famous craftmage Stil—or Rumpelstiltskin. Stil was reclining on mound of pillows, his blue eyes lit with adoration and affection as he looked across the painting at Gemma.

Gemma was seated on a cushioned settee, a soft smile on her lips, and her hand raised as she appeared to pull a needle through an exquisitely embroidered piece of fabric. She wore a Loire-style dress, which was soft blue in color, didn't cover either of her shoulders, and had wide sleeves and a tight bodice.

Gemma's hair was elaborately braided, although wavy strands had come loose and framed her face. She had gold bracelets and necklaces, and gold barrettes secured her hair.

Curled up at her feet was a giant, white, wolf-ish creature. It had a woven collar that was the same color as Gemma's dress, although it

looked out of the portrait with blazing blue eyes.

Long ago, before King Torgen died, Small Tim would have been hard-pressed to call Gemma beautiful. But seeing the portrait—the way happiness softened her face and made her glow, and seeing her relaxed, almost liquid posture—Small Tim couldn't think of a prettier girl in Ostfold.

"She is," Small Tim finally said.

"That Gemma Kielland," Big Tim said, peering over Small Tim's shoulder. "She's done well."

"Gemma Kielland has done more than well," one of the guards said. "She has done *great things*, and she continues to do so as she aids other countries in their battle against dark magic."

"Aye," said several other Sno Hauk patrons.

Otto raised his own mug. "To Gemma Kielland," he said.

"To Gemma Kielland!"

The End

For a free, short story of Rumpelstiltskin *visit* [*www.kmshea.com*](http://www.kmshea.com)

Other books by K.M. Shea

Life Reader

Red Rope of Fate

Princess Ahira

Robyn Hood:
A Girl's Tale
Fight for Freedom

The Magical Beings' Rehabilitation Center:
My Life at the MBRC
Farewell to the MBRC?

King Arthur and Her Knights:
Enthroned
Enchanted
Embittered
Three pack (Enthroned, Enchanted, Embittered)

Timeless Fairy Tales
Beauty and the Beast
The Wild Swans
Cinderella

Coming Soon

King Arthurs and Her Knights, Book 4: January/February 2015
Timeless Fairy Tales: The Little Selkie: April/May 2015

About the Author

K.M. Shea is a book lover, champion web surfer, and all around geek. She's been writing for over ten years and has worked as librarian and a newspaper reporter. K.M. lives in the quaint countryside with her pets: Perfect Dog and Fat Cat.

Follow K.M. Shea on Twitter: KM_Shea

Visit her blog: www.kmshea.com
Visit her Amazon Author Page: http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B005ANPMZU
Please visit the blog for information on upcoming books, free chapters, contests, scheduled freebies, and more!